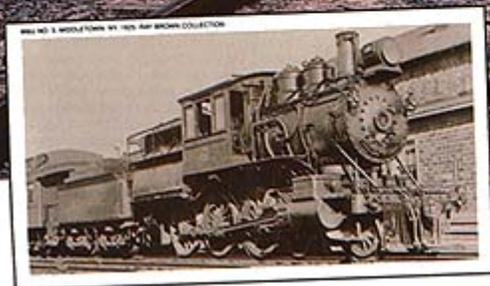
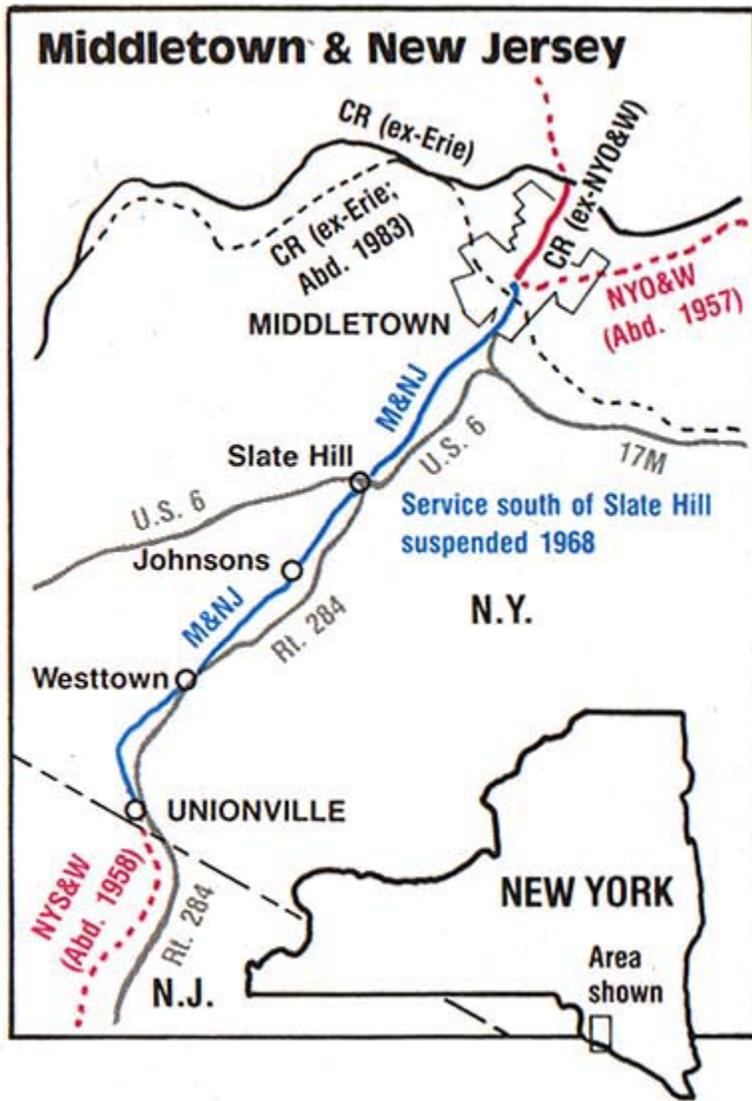


A classic American shortline:

## The Middletown & Unionville/ Middletown & New Jersey

If the concept of shortline railroading with weed-grown rights-of-way, small engines and personal service sounds appealing, then this might be just the road you want to model! Christopher D'Amato and James Ankrom





Maybe it's the fact that the Middletown & New Jersey's president is also the road's conductor and shop foreman and his son is the engineer. Then again, perhaps it's the sight of their little 44-tonner as it slowly trundles down the weed-grown tracks beneath a canopy of spreading tree limbs that arc high over the rails. It could be the sense of history one feels when walking across the worn floor boards in the dimly-lit station and seeing the agent's wooden desk piled high with old Official Guides and paperwork, or when watching the brakeman pull the handle of an ancient cast-iron switchstand, or seeing the engine as it's put away for the night in the old railbus shed. Possibly it's the sight of the crew dropping their work tools to answer a shipper's call and provide him with immediate service. Whatever it is, call it the romantic shortline mystique, quaint, or soulful, the little M&NJ, though somewhat down-on-its-heels, is loaded with charm and personality. In short, the Middletown & New Jersey has all of the characteristics of a classic American shortline: it's a little weathered around the edges, but always trying. It makes do with what it has and provides the kind of personal service that just can't be found on a large railroad. In fact, the M&NJ has outlived its original connections--the Erie; New York, Susquehanna & Western; and New York, Ontario & Western...to survive into the age of Conrail. (As of this reprint the M&NJ has outlived Conrail also)

Suburban sprawl and economic change have taken their toll on downtown Middletown, New York, and the small, surrounding agricultural communities of Orange County, but the M&NJ has adapted and continues to provide needed freight service to its remaining shippers and continues to encourage new industry to locate along the railroad.

#### Early history

The railroad was the brainchild of Elisha Wheeler, a Middletown businessman, and although for most of its life the line served as a bridge line between the New York, Susquehanna & Western to the south and the Erie and New York, Ontario & Western railroads to the north, the original planners had larger ideas that never quite worked out.

The railroad's genesis goes back to 1853, when Wheeler attempted to organize and build the Middletown & Unionville Plank Road. A hemlock-laidplank road was thought to be a solution to the need for better transportation between Middletown, New York, and the New Jersey border. The road was constructed as far as the present Route 6 in Slate Hill, but the outbreak of the Civil War brought construction to a halt and the road failed to reach the New Jersey border. Although never completed, the road did, however, serve to divert some traffic away from rival Newburgh, New York, and onto

the Erie at Middletown.

In 1866, Elisha Wheeler was back again with a new plan: building a railroad. The citizens of Orange County agreed a railroad would indeed bring prosperity to the community, so at a town meeting in Middletown a fund was put aside to proceed with the project. Elisha Wheeler seized the moment and the local peoples' willingness to undertake the project. A month later, on March 3, 1866, the articles of association for the Middletown, Unionville & Water Gap Railroad Company were completed.

Under its charter, which was approved in May, 1866, the MU&WG could extend its line from Middletown to Unionville, New York, and issue \$300,000 worth of capital stock. Original plans called for the road to eventually extend to the Delaware Water Gap in New Jersey, as the road's name implied. Naturally, Elisha Wheeler became president of the line.

Ground breaking took place in Unionville on October 8, 1866, and grading started from the Erie Railroad's connection in Middletown. By December, 1867, the six-foot gauge road was completed to Unionville, and a free excursion trip was operated from Middletown to Unionville and back. Arrangements were made with the Erie to operate the MU&WG and mixed train service was started on May 4, 1868.

Enthusiasm soon waned for the railroad, though. Almost from its inception, the road was in financial trouble. It had cost \$271,000 to build the MU&WG, but only \$110,000 of its stock had been sold. After a modest profit in the first year of operation, the MU&WG started losing money because of the high cost of the Erie's service and the interest on the bonds. When service was cut back in 1871, the MU&WG looked like it was going to join the plank road as the second of Elisha Wheeler's failures.

Luckily enough, construction of a new railroad, the New York & Oswego Midland, began in 1871 with Middletown as a proposed destination. The founders of this new railroad envisioned a "Main line of the Midland Route, from the Hudson to the Great Lakes" and extending from upstate New York to the port of New York. They thought that, through consolidations with other lines, they could accomplish this. Elisha Wheeler was the bonding commissioner for Wallkill Township and through this position was able to become the first vice-president of the Oswego Midland. So, in April, 1871, after business declined with the Erie, Wheeler was able to obtain a lease agreement for the MU&WG with the Oswego Midland. Under the terms of the lease, the MU&WG was to become standard gauge. Since the line was already in debt, this was a problem, but President Wheeler managed to arrange a second mortgage. The rail was upgraded from 50 to 60 pound and on March 31, 1872, the Erie discontinued operation to Unionville.

Not long after the railroad gained its independence, a gaily painted No. 1 was posed with its train of ex-PRR cars.

MIDDLETOWN, NY, CIRCA 1913 RAY BROWN COLLECTION

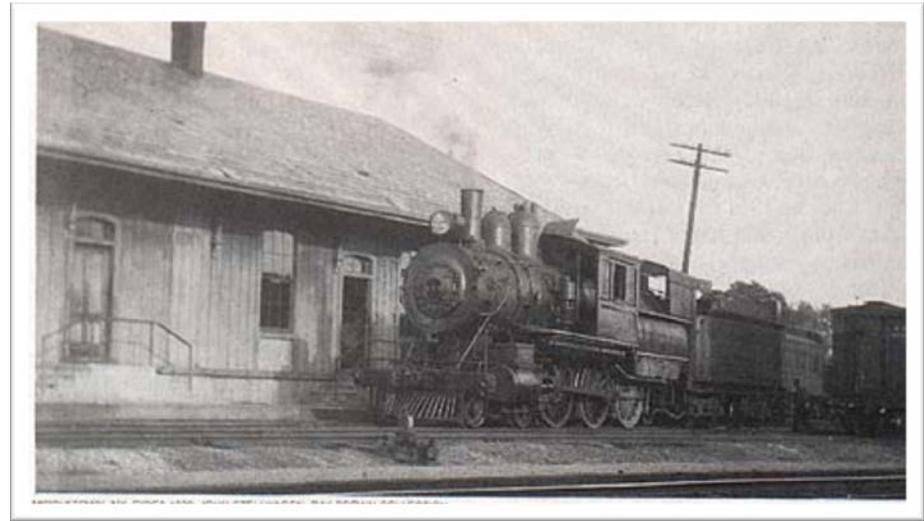


At this same time, four small New Jersey railroads merged to form the New Jersey Midland Railway Company. The president of the line was C.A. Wortendyke and its directors consisted of Elisha Wheeler and James Pronk of the MU&WG, and Dewitt Littlejohn of the NY&OM. The New Jersey

Midland began in Paterson, New Jersey and was intended to extend to Unionville where it would hook up with the Oswego Midland. The New Jersey Midland hoped that the Oswego Midland would lease it and complete the dream of a Midland Route.

On June 17, 1872, after reaching Unionville, the New Jersey Midland was leased to the Oswego Midland. A year later, the Oswego Midland completed their trackage to Oswego and on July 10, 1873, freight service from Jersey City to Oswego was a reality. This illfated merger with all its high hopes, however, only lasted two months, until the Oswego Midland went into receivership and was forced to suspend its leases with the MU&WG and the NJM. The NJM continued to haul freight and passengers to Unionville, but freight traffic on the Oswego Midland was directed to the Erie, which had better terminal facilities in Jersey City.

It was not long until the New Jersey Midland realized that Unionville wasn't much of a terminus and that to survive they would have to establish a connection to Middletown. They therefore made a rental agreement with the MU&WG that was a very sweet deal for Elisha Wheeler and the stockholders. Under the arrangements, the New Jersey Midland not only paid a fee for rental but picked up all funded debt, taxes and assessments. The new terminus for the NJM became the Oswego Midland's depot in Middletown. For a while, the NY&OM's freight business was rerouted back to the New Jersey Midland's route and an overnight service was started between New York, Paterson and Middletown. This traffic included the lucrative milk business. All of this effort, however, could not save the failing NJM and in 1875 the New Jersey Midland went into receivership.



The following year brought the death of Elisha Wheeler. He had sacrificed all to keep the dream of the Midland Route alive and in the process had seen the failure of the Oswego Midland and his bank in Middletown. Grinnel Burt, who eventually would become the first president of the Lehigh & Hudson River Railroad, succeeded Wheeler as president of the MU&WG.

For the next four years, the New Jersey Midland was in receivership and struggled to keep traffic on the line to Middletown. To their credit, they managed to pay the rent on the MU&WG. In the winter of 1879, however, passenger service was suspended and the picture was bleak on the Midland Route. Finally on May 15, 1880, the NJM was able to reorganize into the Midland Railroad Company of New Jersey.

The new Midland's first order of business was to cut expenses and that meant renegotiating the lease on the MU&WG. When the two railroads could not come to terms on an agreement the MU&WG told the Midland to vacate their tracks, and the Midland countered by threatening to build a parallel line to Middletown. The Midland stayed despite the lease dispute, and the MU&WG acquired the nickname of "the Mean & Useless."

The next three years saw dramatic changes happen to all the railroads in the Middletown area. First, the New York & Oswego Midland was reorganized into the



New York, Ontario & Western in 1880. Rather than use the Midland Route to get their freight to New York, the NYO&W chose to organize the New River Construction Company with the New York, West Shore & Buffalo. In addition to building a railroad on the west shore of the Hudson River for the NYWS&B, the company built a branch for the NYO&W between Middletown, N.Y. and Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York. This opened in May, 1883, and with trackage rights over the NYWS&B, the NYO&W was able to get all of its freight and passengers to Weehawken, New Jersey.

Another big event happened when the Midland Railroad, which still lacked an adequate western terminus, decided to extend itself to the coal fields of northeastern Pennsylvania. In the summer of 1881, a number of companies merged with the Midland to form the New York, Susquehanna & Western Railroad. In 1882, the Susquehanna opened their new extension from Beaver Lake, New Jersey, to Gravel Place (near Stroudsburg), Pennsylvania. This had the effect of no longer making the MU&WG a main line route.

By the mid-1880s, the MU&WG was in physically poor health. Major repairs were needed for not only the roadbed, but to several bridges. When the settlement of the lease agreement was finally ended, the MU&WG was given a share of the mileage credit for the overhead traffic, but had to pay the Susquehanna for maintenance to the property. This lease was to stay in place for 30 years.

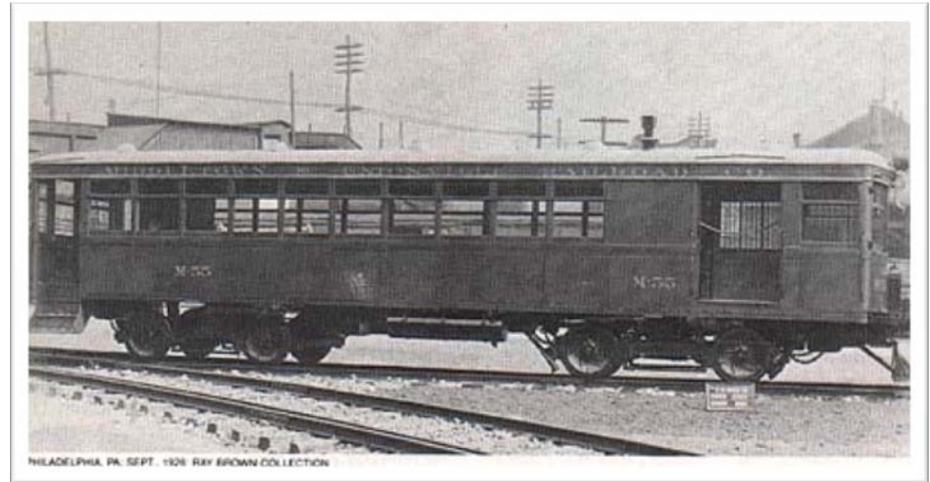
During this time the Susquehanna ran two passenger trains a day between Middletown and Beaver Lake, while agricultural products, coal and milk traversed the MU&WG in freight trains.

On February 1, 1898, the Erie took over the Susquehanna and its subsidiary the MU&WG. The Susquehanna lease of the MU&WG remained in effect under the Erie's management. Little changed under the Erie and the physical condition of the MU&WG continued to improve with repairs to the bridges and roadbed.

Although the 30 year lease was beneficial to the Susquehanna and the Erie, it was spelling the end for the MU&WG. When the first mortgage came due in 1886, there was no money to pay the bondholders and a 25 year extension was given. Ten years later, the bonds were due on the second mortgage, and once again the MU&WG couldn't pay. This time, the bondholders grudgingly agreed to a 13 year extension, but only after the Susquehanna guaranteed payment of the interest. When the mortgages came due again, the Erie, which now controlled the Susquehanna, failed to pay the bond interest. This led the bond holders to start trying to regain control of their road in 1910. In September, 1913, the two mortgage holding groups foreclosed on the MU&WG and a month later the railroad was sold at public auction in Middletown for 85,000. Two gentlemen, Charles Henry and Garrett Townsend bought the MU&WG and immediately changed the name of the road to the Middletown & Unionville.

### The Middletown & Unionville

Since the MU&WG was little more than a paper railroad they owned no rolling stock and didn't have any operating crews or maintenance people there was an



The Unionville depot (above) was the second largest station on the line and because of the interchange traffic at M&U Jct., it was kept open after passenger service ended. The smaller depots (below) at Westtown, Johnsons and Slate Hill were all similar in design.

immediate need for motive power and rolling stock. A 4-4-0 was purchased from the Pittsburgh & Lake Erie and became M&U No. 1, and a coach and combine were bought from the Pennsylvania Railroad.

With an engine to pull their trains, the new owners turned their attention to business. Apparently they were not satisfied to let the railroad be merely a bridge line, plans were made to build a branch from Johnson southeast to Wilcox, New York, where the M&U would hook up with the Lehigh & New England. The LNE intended to send coal trains to Middletown, but decided against this route. A second proposal was then made to run the line from Unionville to Owens, New Jersey. Disrupted by the Interstate Commerce Commission valuation surveys of 1916 and later WWI, this plan also never materialized.

Revenue for the M&U came from online traffic that included milk, agricultural products, feed, fertilizer and lumber, but the most valuable source of revenue for the Middletown & Unionville was the overhead interchange traffic. This consisted primarily of coal and some boxcar freight from the NYO&W.

Although the railroad was running as many as seven round trips a day on the line in 1919, passenger service was never an important source of income and it was only by using railbuses that the line found it economical to operate.



The first two of these were purchased in 1919 from J. Blaine Worcester, of Middletown, to transport school children to and from Middletown. They were Reo 20-passenger buses that had had their steering columns used for brakewheels and their tires replaced with flanged wheels. The front pair of wheels, however, were soon replaced by a small fourwheel pony truck and all subsequent M&U Reos were equipped in the same fashion.

The Reos were run coupled back-to-back and made several trips daily along the length of the line. Stops were made at Haunted House, Slate Hill, Johnson, Rutgers, Westtown, Waterloo Mills and Unionville, and passengers could flag the motorcar down at grade crossings. The railcar concept proved itself a success, but the two railcars, which lacked heat and sufficient traction for operation in snow and ice, did not. They were sold off in October, 1919, to an Alabama shortline and another pair, which saw only two months service on the M&U, was sold to a Florida shortline in November of that same year. In 1921, the railroad purchased another pair of Reos from Worcester and in 1923, the larger of these was traded in for a larger Gramm-Bernstein bus.

On September 14, 1926, the GrammBernstein was wrecked in a grade crossing accident at Dolson Avenue, and the M&U wasted no time in ordering a replacement car from Brill on the same day. The M&U officials had visited the Brill plant in Philadelphia in December, 1924, and had received a demonstration. Apparently impressed with what they saw, the M&U and Brill had been in correspondence just months before the accident. The Brill Company responded to the M&U's immediate needs by preparing and lettering a Model 55 that had been used at the plant as a demonstrator. On September 20, less than a week after the accident, the Brill car left Philadelphia on the Pennsylvania Railroad. At 6:35 that evening it arrived under its own power in Middletown via the Erie Railroad. With the arrival of the Brill car, which cost \$6,800, the remaining Reo car and the wrecked Gramm-Bernstein were retired from the roster.

When the Brill was out of service, passengers were carried in caboose No. 51. This caused complaints from the school children, who got up a petition against riding in the caboose. The railroad responded by also using an O&W coach for the children when the Brill was down.

Over the years, as automobiles became more plentiful, the number of passenger runs slowly dropped. By 1940, it had dwindled to two Monday through Friday round trips that were patronized largely by high school students going to Middletown. With no school bus service, students along the route would ride the train. The M&U offered them a 60-trip commuter ticket. When a new high school was built in Middletown further from the M&U tracks, ridership dropped and finally, in 1942, all passenger service was discontinued.

Like the railcars, the motive power on the M&U continued to change. In January, 1916, the M&U purchased a 2-6-0 from the NYO&W along with a plow for the front of the engine to clear the line of snow. In June of the following year, this engine, numbered 2, was involved in a bad accident and sent to the NYO&W's Norwich, New York, shops for repairs. Due to the great expense of keeping it operating, it was sold in the fall of 1917 to the St. Joseph Valley Railroad in Indiana.

Five years later, a second No. 2 was purchased by the railroad. It was a 4-6-0 camelback from the Lehigh & Hudson River. Pleased with the engine, the M&U bought two more identical camelbacks from the L&HR and numbered them 3 and 4. These locomotives, along with No. 5, a 2-6-0 purchased from the Mount Hope Mineral Railroad, handled the railroad's peak traffic period between 1920 and 1930.

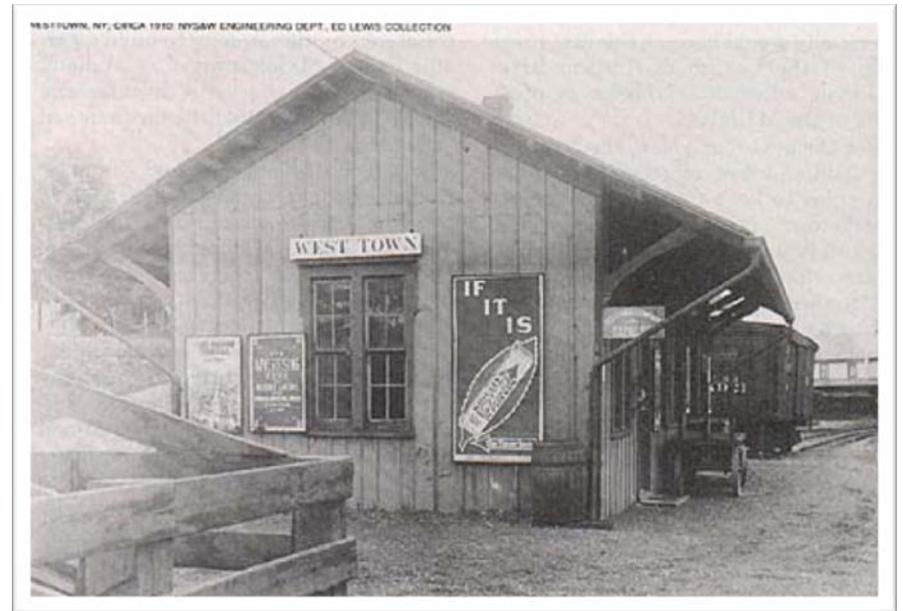
No. 6, a Cooke Locomotive Works 4-40, came to the railroad in 1935 from the NYO&W, and according to reports, was the M&U's best running engine. When cracks appeared in its firebox in 1940, however, it was replaced by the last steam engine purchased by the M&U a 2-8-0 from the Belfonte Central that was originally owned by the Detroit, Toledo & Ironton. It became M&U No. 7. Five years later, with the No. 7 in sorry shape and considered too light for the traffic, the M&U turned to the Susquehanna for power. Between July 22, 1945, and April 19, 1946, the M&U operated (one at a time) NYS&W Russian Decapods 2451, 2461, 2492 and 2435. In 1946, the motive power was so worn that the M&U was having trouble running local freights. To keep the railroad going, three businessmen in the area pooled their resources and bought a General Electric 44-tonner. This 380 h.p. diesel electric, ideally suited for shortline work, was leased to the railroad and became M&U No. 1.

Enter the M&NJ

Just as passenger traffic had dropped off, so did the freight loadings, but the railroad continued to look for ways to improve business. Discussions were held in 1938 with the Erie and the Susquehanna, which it controlled, over the possible takeover by the Middletown & Unionville of the NYS&W's Hanford branch from the interchange at Hanford (M&U Jct.) to Beaver Lake, New Jersey. Further, consideration was given to running Susquehanna-bound NYO&W freight trains with their Y and Y2 class 4-8-2's over the M&U. This plan required the strengthening of the bridges on the M&U and a study by the Erie engineering department put the cost for this work at \$3,800. These plans, however, never got beyond the discussion stage.

A brief bright spot did appear in 1940, though, when the Susquehanna, no longer controlled by the Erie, directed the NYO&W to deliver coal bound for Edgewater, New Jersey, to them via the Middletown & Unionville, instead of the previous routing over the Erie to Passaic Junction, New Jersey.

On days when the coal was moving, it was sometimes necessary for the M&U to make several roundtrips with their Consolidation between

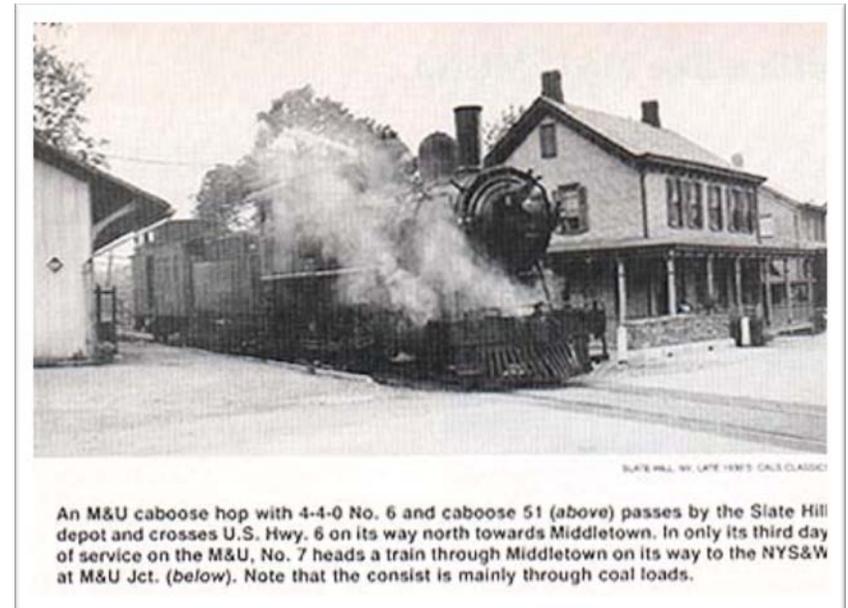


Middletown and Unionville to handle the traffic. The No. 7 was not heavy enough to move all of the cars at once.

Unfortunately for the M&U, this traffic pattern lasted for only a year-and-a-half and was apparently arranged by the Susquehanna in an effort to gain trackage rights over the NYO&W and reduce their New Jersey taxes. When the plan failed to have the desired effect, the routing was changed to bypass the Susquehanna's heavy grades in New Jersey.

The new route, via the NYO&W to the Susquehanna's yard at Little Ferry, New Jersey, meant the loss of much needed traffic for the M&U. This, coupled with the fact that the milk traffic had already gone to trucks, and that coal, by the mid-to-late 1940s, was slowly on its way out as a fuel, spelled trouble for the M&U. In fact, in 1942, the M&U had a discussion with a salvage company, A.A. Morrison, of Buffalo, New York, concerning the possibility of selling the railroad for scrap. An offer of \$45,000 for all of the physical assets of the railroad was made, but not accepted by the M&U.

Unable to pay its debts, the Middletown & Unionville was put on the auction block in January, 1947. Only two viable parties attended the auction. One was a local junk man who wanted to tear up the railroad for scrap. The other interested group was made up of three businessmen: Benjamin Simmons, H.T. Manning and Heulet Clark. These gentlemen wanted the railroad to continue to service their warehouses and retail stores. They were the same people who earlier bought the diesel for the M&U. A stipulation was made at the auction that the buyer had to operate the M&U for six months before abandonment or any scraping took place. This stopped the bidding by the junk man who had no intention of running a railroad. The railroad was saved from the scrapyard for the price of \$22,000 by the three men and it was given a new name: the Middletown & New Jersey Railway. One of the partners joked after the sale was made, "We simply bought a railroad to run our engine on."



An M&U caboose hop with 4-4-0 No. 6 and caboose 51 (above) passes by the Slate Hill depot and crosses U.S. Hwy. 6 on its way north towards Middletown. In only its third day of service on the M&U, No. 7 heads a train through Middletown on its way to the NYS&W at M&U Jct. (below). Note that the consist is mainly through coal loads.



For the next ten years the M&NJ enjoyed reasonably profitable times. Louis Zierres, an ex-employee of the M&U and a man with twenty-five years experience, was in charge of the daily operations of the line. The bridge traffic produced the bulk of the road's profit, but the local freight helped keep the M&NJ viable. It also gave the local area the potential for future growth.

The period of prosperity ended in March, 1957, when the New York, Ontario & Western discontinued operations. Not only did this eliminate bridge traffic, but it hindered the maintenance of M&NJ equipment, which had been done in the NYO&W shops in Middletown. Monthly inspections and repairs now had to be made at the Erie's Port Jervis, New York, shops at greatly increased expense.

The next blow to the M&NJ came the following year when the Susquehanna applied to the ICC for abandonment of their Hanford branch. Hanford was the name used by the Susquehanna for their yard and connection with the M&NJ at the New Jersey/New York border at Unionville. The Susquehanna, which had been losing money on their operations, started pruning their unprofitable branches and cutting back on services.

Around this time, according to a Middletown newspaper, a New Jersey businessman, Jay Wulfson, tried to purchase the Middletown & New Jersey with the idea of establishing a rail line from Andover, New Jersey, to Kingston, New York (via the Lackawanna, NYS&W, M&NJ and NYO&W), but an attempt to get Sussex Agway to finance the portion of the Susquehanna between Sussex and the state line failed and the idea died.

In May, 1958, the estate of Benjamin Simmons sold its share of the road to John Manning and the road's lawyer, Marc Suffern. They, too, tried to get local interests behind the purchase of the Susquehanna trackage from Hanford to Sussex, but they also failed in raising the needed funds and in August, 1958, the NYS&W's Hanford branch was scrapped. The two men, however, continued to

hold out hope that the M&NJ would see some kind of revival. In fact, plans were made to repaint the depot in Middletown and Mr. Suffern was quoted in a local paper as saying, "We are now negotiating with two small industries who are interested in our section of the state, and we feel that they will move here. At the same time, we are prepared to acquire industrial sites, even build a building for a prospective manufacturer in a general effort to spur business and industry." This enthusiasm was to be short lived, as business conditions didn't improve.

The railroad struggled along for the next few years, running sometimes one train a week from Middletown. Usually, this train only went as far as Westtown to provide service for the Ford-WeldCox feed concern.

In February, 1961, Jay Wulfson made another offer to buy the M&NJ, this time with two partners: James Wright and Pierre Rasmussen. John Manning and Marc Suffern saw a way out of a losing situation so they and the estate of Hulet Clark sold the line without much fanfare. The new owners had great hopes for reviving the line and brought new business sense to the aging operation.

That same year, the Lehigh & New England abandoned its operations in Sussex, New Jersey. This left the town without rail service for the first time since 1872. To handle Sussex rail traffic, the M&NJ turned its mainline south of the Unionville depot into something of a team track for use by the Sussex merchants and a conveyor was set up along the track for unloading feed for Sussex Agway. This brought M&NJ trains to Unionville at least two to three times a week.

The hopes of the M&NJ brightened in 1961, when the Empire State Railway Museum decided to run railfan trips over the line. On May 31, 1961, the first trip left Middletown with the No. 1 pulling two rented Stillwell coaches. It was a success, but nothing compared to the enthusiasm brought by the Empire State's purchase of an ex-Sumpter & Choctaw Railway 2-6-0. Steam was once again visiting the rails between Middletown and Unionville. Many successful trips were made and local railfan groups spent weekends doing volunteer maintenance work along the line. Gradually, however, patronage fell off, especially during the hot summer months. The decline in ridership brought an end to the steam trips after the 1964 season.

In 1963, Jay Wulfson went to Vermont and started the Vermont Railway on the state-owned ex-Rutland rails. In need of motive power, he turned to the M&NJ, which had recently purchased another 44-tonner. The original 44tonner went north to the Granite State, while the new engine, purchased from American Cyanimid (Calco Chemical) became No. 2 and went to work on the Middletown & New Jersey. Pierre Rasmussen took over the presidency of the company--a title he still holds. The No. 1 came back to



the M&NJ in December, 1964.

The largest customer on the line during this time was the Middletown Grange League Federation, a New York farmer's co-op, which around 1960 merged with a New England co-op to form Agway. In the early 1960s, the Agway set up a bulk feed operation and increased its incoming carloads of feed and fertilizer. Loads of feed would arrive by rail, be blended together and then delivered by truck to farmers. By 1962, this business had increased to the point where a second siding had to be added. Loads went in the south end and empties were taken out of the north end. Sometimes two set outs would be made there in one day, for a total of 12 loads (approximately 1,000 tons of feed).

Although business was good for a short time, a setback was the suspension of service from Johnson south to Unionville. This was brought about when Sussex Agway started receiving shipments by truck and the Ford-WeldCox feed store was destroyed by fire in Westtown. Difficulties in removing heavy snow accumulation from the rails south of Johnson during the winter also contributed to the suspension of service on the southern end of the line. The M&NJ's last run to Unionville occurred on December 31, 1968.

In 1970, the feed store in Johnson closed and there was no longer any need for rail service south of Slate Hill, although the rails were left in place. In 1968-1969, the Middletown & New Jersey picked up two important new customers. Balchem Corporation opened a chemical plant in the former Middletown Milk & Feed's grade B creamery in Slate Hill and took delivery of tank cars.

Polytherm, a new plastics manufacturer in Middletown, began receiving carloads of plastic pellets and tank cars of Isopentane. The company made foam cups, plates and other plastic dinner ware and shipped out up to four carloads a day. This was a real boost to the railroad, and a new spur was built to accommodate the company.



SLATE HILL, NY, MID 1960'S, CARL DETWYLER

When the railroad was purchased in 1961, the black and white paint scheme was replaced with a red and gray scheme similar to the Raritan River's (*above*). The similarity was no coincidence, as owner Pierre Rasmussen once worked for that New Jersey shortline. In 1977, the railroad applied its current blue and yellow scheme (*below*). Despite the construction of a new shop, the railbus shed still houses the working engine.

### Boxcar blues

In December, 1977, Pierre Rasmussen entered into an Incentive Per Diem agreement with the National Railway Utilization Corporation (NRUC) to lease 500 powder-blue, 50-foot boxcars marked with M&NJ lettering. The cars started arriving in January, 1978. This was supposed to be a boon for the little railroad, especially with the great boxcar shortage of the mid-1970s. Unfortunately, the deregulation of motor carriers and the eventual purchase of boxcars by Class 1 railroads ended the potential prosperity for shortlines like the M&NJ. In quick order the great boxcar shortage soon ended and leasing agreements turned into nightmares.

In the summer of 1979, Conrail started bringing the IPD boxcars back to the M&NJ, as the leasing market went flat. An unused portion of track south of Slate Hill had to be cleared of a decade's worth of brush and trees to accommodate the long line of boxcars. Using the two 44-tonners to move the cuts of cars south, the run-around track at Slate Hill found frequent use. When more cars came in for storage, short cuts of already stored cars were brought up the line by one loco to the run around at Slate Hill, where that engine would be cut off the front end and the other locomotive would be coupled onto the rear of the cut to push the cars north. This maneuvering continued until the cars farthest south were reached. They were pushed even further towards Unionville, and then the whole process

was reversed.

The disposition of the cars during the 1980s came in many forms: Some of them were sold to other lessors and various railroads. Others cars were probably scrapped. Today the M&NJ still has four of these cars in service for use as spacer units when they haul loaded tank cars to Slate Hill. As far as NRUC is concerned, they are still in business, although not on the scale they were in the late 1970s.

The steam engine that didn't

The oil embargos of the 1970s led the M&NJ to look at steam power as an alternative to the 44-tonners when the price of diesel fuel soared and its availability became questionable. The Crab Orchard & Egyptian, an Illinois shortline of similar size was using a coal burning steam locomotive to successfully move its freight. The M&NJ saw the potential for similar savings on their line and since coal was plentiful, it would allow the railroad to offer its customers dependable service regardless of the foreign oil markets.

MIDDLETOWN, NY, JAN 27, 1988 CHRIS D'AMATO



In 1981, the M&NJ purchased a small 2-6-0 from the Narragansett Pier Railroad. This little 1923 Alco was built for that company, but they sold it to the Bath & Hammondsport in 1938. In 1955, that New York shortline sold it to the Rail City Museum at Sands Creek, N.Y. The museum fell on hard times, and in 1976, the Narragansett Pier brought the engine back home to Rhode Island. Whatever plans the NP might have had for the engine became mute when it too folded up. The little steam engine was once again put up for sale and the M&NJ purchased it and brought it to Middletown where it was placed on a siding.

Unfortunately, the engine lacked boiler panels. Before the railroad could straighten out the paper problems and begin work to get the engine steaming, the Agway bulk feed depot closed, resulting in a loss of 75 percent of the rail road's freight revenues, and the oil markets stabilized and the price of diesel fuel began to drop. With no extra money to fix the steamer and no longer any pressing need for its services, the engine now sits quietly inside the railroad's new enginehouse, waiting for a call to action that may never come.

Current Operations

Today's Middletown & New Jersey hauls freight on an as needed basis. Pierre Rasmussen and his son Harold perform almost all the operational work including maintenance of the No. 2 with the help of two part-time brakeman. The No. 1, which hasn't been used is sometime, is presently stored in the shop in need of some repair.

Once or twice a month runs are made to Slate Hill to spot tank cars of Ethylene Oxide at the Balchem plant. This company repackages the chemical for distribution to hospitals and laboratories. More regular, however, is the delivery of Center-flow hoppers filled with plastic pellets to the former Polytherm plant, now known as Genpak Corporation. Such trips are usually made once or twice a week. Since the deregulation of motor carriers, the outbound loads have gone to trucks, but despite this, Genpak remains the M&NJ's biggest customer.

Occasionally, the railroad still delivers fertilizer to the Agway on the north side of Dolson Avenue (not to be confused with the Agway that operated the bulk feed depot on the south side of Dolson Ave.) in covered hoppers, but these shipments are few and far between.

When the train isn't running, attention is turned to the more mundane aspects of operating a railroad. Paperwork is the biggest chore facing the

**M&NJ and even with the assistance of a part-time secretary, filing reports and filling out forms is still time consuming. Track and locomotive maintenance are also attended to when the train isn't running and on a small railroad like the M&NJ, where a sharp eye must always be kept on the bottom line, that means doing things yourself where ever possible.**

**Stay tuned**

**Shortline railroads make great modeling subjects. Unlike the larger Class 1 railroads whose far-flung lines stretch across states and whose corporate ledgers may include everything from oil refineries to food companies, it is possible to get to know every part of a shortline--to walk its tracks and see every tie. In future issues we will present track plans designed by Allen McClelland and Jim Slaughter for both today's M&NJ operations and the full M&U trackage as it was operated in 1940. Modeling articles for the 2-8-0 No. 7, 44-tonner No. 2, caboose 51, and the new enginehouse are also planned for future installments, along with drawings for the Middletown and Slate Hill depots.**

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