

Appendix F

Tom Reeves - May 30, 2023

The History of the Lower Road Rail Line

What is known as the Lower Road extending from Portland through Brunswick and Augusta to Waterville was constructed in the 19th century by two different railroad companies. The line from Portland to Brunswick and Augusta was completed in 1852 by the Kennebec & Portland Railroad. The line from Augusta north to Waterville was constructed by the Somerset & Kennebec Railroad in 1856. In 1870 Maine Central Railroad consolidated these two lines and made them part of its expanding rail network.

Peak operations on this line as well as the rest of Maine occurred in the 1920's. In 1920 there were 13 daily passenger trains between Portland and Waterville. Thereafter, passenger service and to a lesser extent freight declined with increased competition from automobile, bus, trucks and an ever expanding paved highway system as well as competition from air traffic. This decline was temporarily halted during the Second World War when civilian car manufacturing ceased and fuel as well as tires were rationed.

In 1947 the nation's first postwar era superhighway was constructed in Maine as a toll road between Kittery and Portland. By 1955 the Maine Turnpike had been extended from Portland to Lewiston to Augusta. In that same year the passenger rail service deficit experienced by New England rail carriers amounted to nearly \$32 million which absorbed two thirds of the net operating income from freight service. In 1956 Congress authorized funding for the interstate highway system. The building of these two networks would radically alter land transportation in Maine.

The first impact was on passenger rail traffic which rapidly dwindled. By 1958 Maine Central carried just under 250,000 passengers. In comparison the Maine Turnpike that same year had nearly 3,500,000 passenger cars a gain of 150 % over its first full year in operation in 1948 when there were 1,379,000 passenger cars. With those forces in play passenger service was unsustainable and in 1960 Maine Central operated the last passenger rail service over the Lower Road as well as anywhere else in Maine. The hope was that with the cessation of unprofitable passenger rail that freight service would be able to stabilize the finances of the rail company. That assumption would prove to be problematic.

Truck traffic would continue to erode some of its traffic. But what was even more pronounced on the railroad's revenue stream was the steady decline of the state's manufacturing sector, particularly the paper-making industry which throughout the 20th century had been the foundation for freight operations in Maine. In his history of the Maine Central Bradley Peters, who was an Assistant to the President of the railroad, wrote that "it is obvious that Maine Central is a pulp and paper railroad. Nearly sixty percent of Maine Central's business involves transporting raw materials and finished products for Maine's greatest manufacturing enterprise." ¹

¹ Bradley L. Peters, *Maine Central Railroad Company: A Story of Success and Independence*, (Portland Me.: Maine Central Railroad Company, 1976), p.13.

In the 1960's that industry had 28 plants which employed more than 18,000 workers. Eight of those plants were along the Kennebec and were served by the Lower Road. (Augusta 1, Gardiner 2, Madison 2, Shawmut 1, Waterville 1, and Winslow 1). Over the ensuing half century the industry consolidated and relocated to sites outside Maine. By 2022 the industry was but a shadow of itself with just 8 plants in Maine employing 2,800 workers. Only one plant remains along the Kennebec and that is Sappi's facility in Skowhegan which was built in 1976. The decline in manufacturing impacted how the rail industry could operate in Maine and led to further consolidation and retrenchment.

When Guildford Transportation Industries acquired Maine Central in 1981 it decided to downsize a third of its freight system. As part of this re-alignment, Guilford made the Back Road (Portland through Lewiston to Waterville) its primary freight route and largely discontinued any service north of Brunswick. The last through train between Brunswick and Augusta occurred in 1986 and in 1989 the railroad sought permission to abandon service between Brunswick and Augusta. Before formal abandonment occurred the State acquired in 1991 the Lower Road from Brunswick to Augusta for the purpose of either restoring rail service or preserving the corridor for future rail or transportation use. The State through the Maine Department of Transportation (MDOT) manages the line.

Since acquiring the line, MDOT has leased the line to three short line operators: Maine Coast (1990-2000), Safe Handling (2000-2004), and Maine Eastern (2004-2015). During this entire period freight traffic was very light and passenger service consisted of seasonal excursion service for a couple of summers and infrequent one-time special trips, the last one occurring in 2008. Currently the line is not used by any rail operator, and service along the entire line from Brunswick to Waterville is no longer possible since it is blocked in two locations. One location is in Augusta where since the 1990's MDOT has permitted the Augusta Parking District to fill a portion of the line on the west side of the Kennebec River with gravel so as to provide additional downtown parking space. The second spot is in Richmond just north of its village center where the line crosses Route 24 by an overpass. That overpass was removed in 2017 by MDOT at the request of the town to improve truck safety and access. In 2022 the supporting granite abutments for the overpass were also removed.

In the 21st century the importance of the pulp and paper industry and lumber products to Maine's railroads is even more pronounced. The two commodities account for 96 percent of originating rail traffic in Maine and inputs needed for these two industries represent 71 percent of terminating rail traffic. Maine Department of Transportation, *2014 Maine State Rail Plan*, (Augusta, Me.: Maine Department of Transportation, July, 2014), p 4-2, 4-3. Trucking is by far the dominant mode accounting for nearly 87 percent of Maine's freight tonnage. Cambridge Systematics Inc. prepared for Maine Department of Transportation, *Maine Integrated Freight Strategy: Final Report*, 2014, p. ES-3.