

NEW

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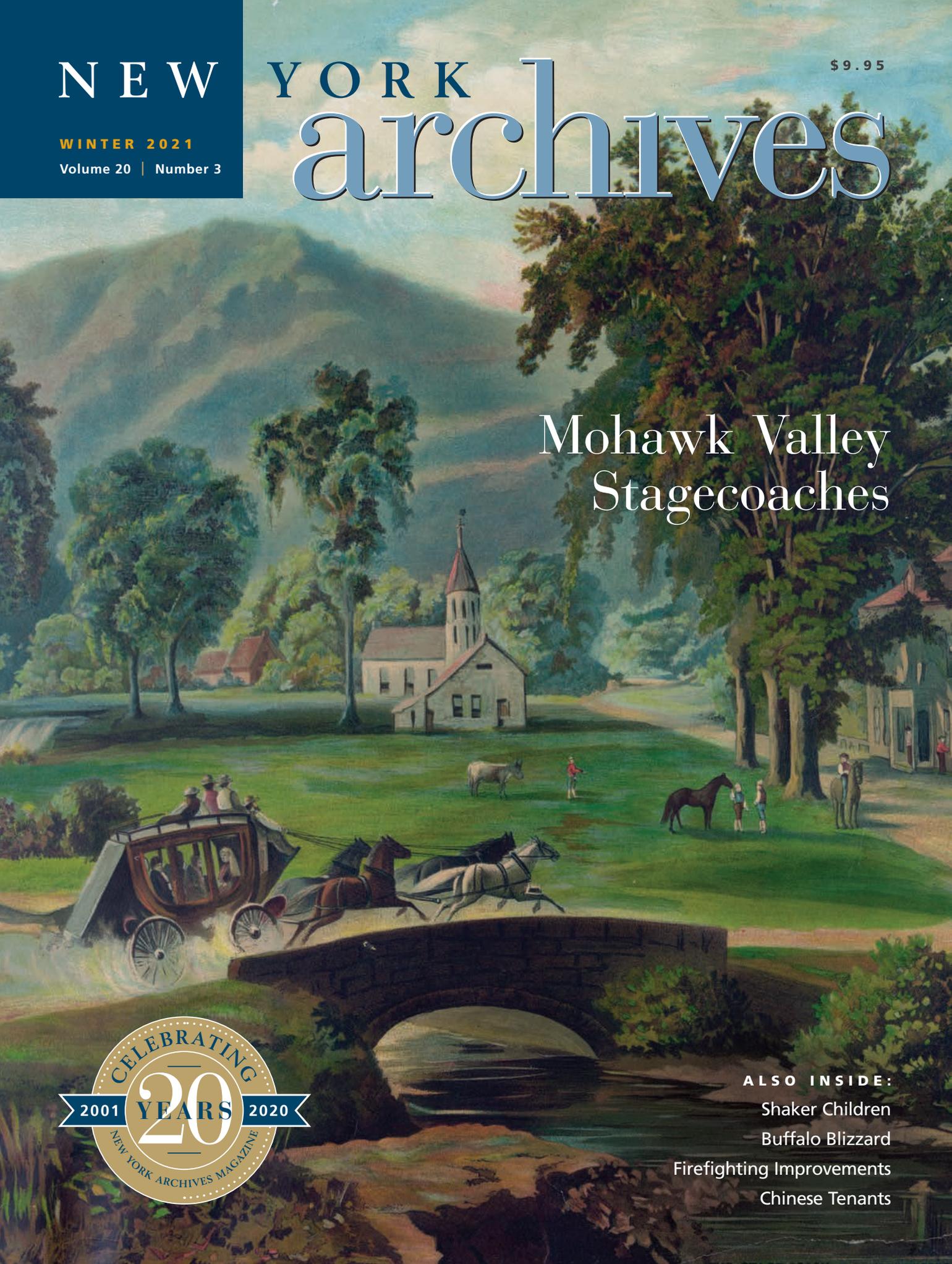
\$9.95

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archives

Mohawk Valley Stagecoaches



ALSO INSIDE:

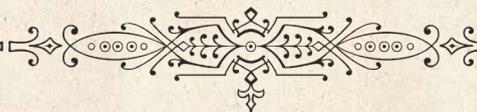
- Shaker Children
- Buffalo Blizzard
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- Chinese Tenants

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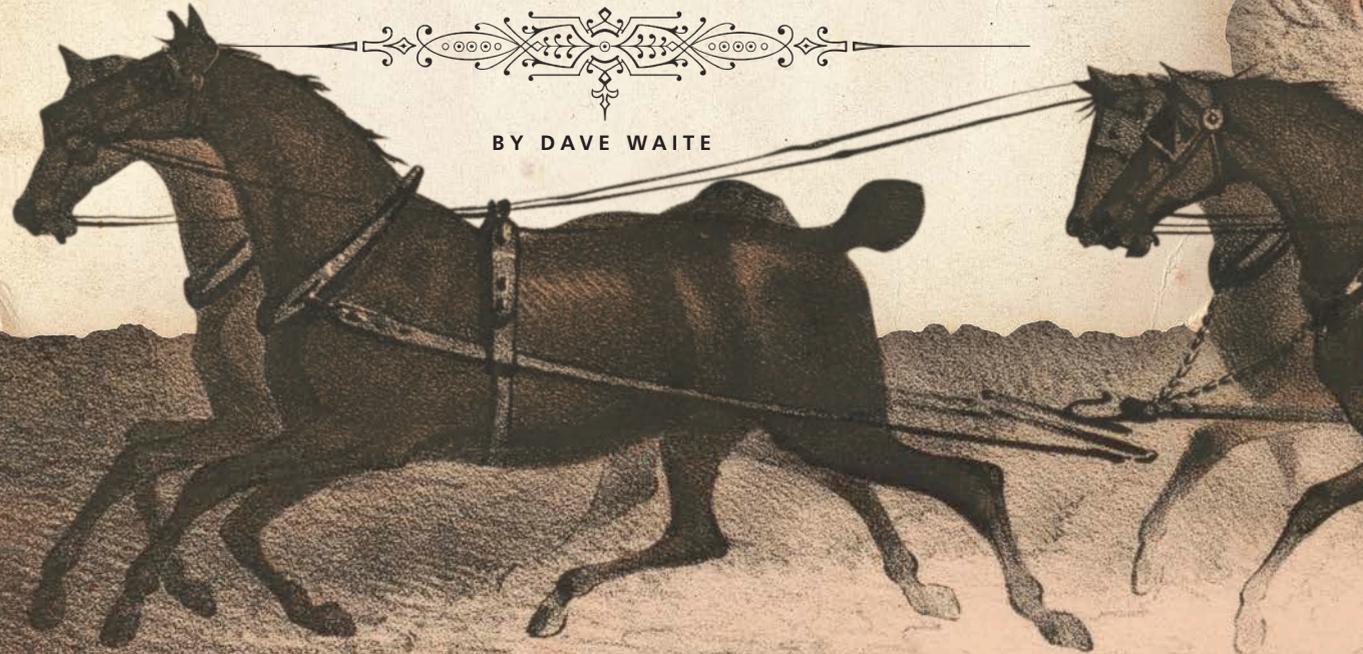
ENERGY

AND

SUCCESS



BY DAVE WAITE



**THORP & SPRAGUE'S MOHAWK VALLEY
STAGE LINE**

Stagecoaches didn't offer wild rides, just reliable transport.



Hearing the word “stagecoach” can conjure up visions of a mad dash across an open desert between a racing coach and masked desperados with guns blazing. In Upstate New York, the scene was far more likely to be that same stagecoach filled with

bored passengers pulling up to a rural tavern and the driver tossing a mailbag filled with letters and newspapers to the waiting post master.

By 1815, Aaron Thorp, Asa Sprague, and Thomas Powell were running a daily line of stages

between Albany and Utica, and a year later added another stage, making the trip three days a week. In early 1825, Thomas Powell published an announcement in the *Schenectady Cabinet* that due to ill health he was passing the control of his line of stages to his son,

Thorp and Sprague
Schenectady
1830



NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES

William H. Powell, and colleague Aaron Thorp. Later that year, the 55-year-old Powell passed away and the business was renamed Powell & Thorp's Mail Stage. By 1828, it changed again, this time to Thorp & Sprague, a name under which it would continue to operate until its closing in 1838.

Jason Parker, J. Wetmore, and Isaac Sherwood, the proprietors of the stage line west of Utica banded together with Thorp & Sprague on the eastern end to maintain exclusive control of the passenger transportation over this great line of travel. This loose partnership was often referred to as the "Western Mail Stages." The agreement that bound these separate owners was detailed when some of the parties brought a lawsuit against the others to recover what they thought was withheld income. During the court case, it was revealed that each individual stage line owner would run the line between certain sections along

IMAGES (TOP LEFT AND RIGHT) FROM VAULT BOOK 22, FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE SCHENECTADY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

SIX PASSENGERS ONLY.



The subscribers - having long been solicited by the travelling public to establish a Line of Stages between Albany and Buffalo, have now the pleasure to inform their friends, that a new *Line of Stages*, called the TELEGRAPH, is now running daily between ALBANY and BUFFALO.

The Telegraph leaves Albany at 3 o'clock, P. M. and arrives at Utica the next morning, from 6 to 8 o'clock; leaves Utica from 8 to 9 o'clock, A. M. and arrives at Canandaigua from 4 to 6 o'clock, A. M.; leaves Canandaigua from 6 to 7 o'clock, A. M. and arrives at Buffalo the same evening at 11 o'clock. *Returning:* leaves Buffalo at 7 o'clock, P. M. and arrives at Canandaigua from 8 to 10 o'clock next morning; leaves Canandaigua from 10 to 11 o'clock, A. M. and arrives at Utica from 6 to 8 o'clock, A. M.; leaves Utica from 8 to 10 o'clock, A. M. and arrives at Albany from 2 to 4 o'clock, A. M. The route between Albany and Buffalo being performed in about *fifty-three hours*.

N. B. The above arrangements will be strictly observed, except when prevented by bad state of the roads.

REGULATIONS.

1. The Telegraph will carry the Steamboat Mail, and travel DAY and NIGHT.
2. It will receive but six passengers, (gentlemen's servants excepted.)
3. It will not be detained in waiting for passengers.
4. It will receive and deliver passengers at the stage offices *only*, Albany, Utica, and Buffalo excepted.
5. Breakfast, dinner and supper will be provided at certain established houses for victualling, and *no others*.
6. No person after having taken this line will be permitted to abandon his seat, and resume it again on any subsequent day; but will have the privilege of taking either the other lines for the fare so paid. No person having paid fare in either the other lines, will have the privilege of taking *this*, for the same fare. Baggage at the risk of its owner.

THORP & SPRAGUE, Albany,
JASON PARKER & CO. Utica,
JOHN M. SHERWOOD & CO. Auburn,
CHAUNCEY H. COE & CO. Canandaigua,
BELA D. COE, Buffalo,

aug 6-C&Sf

Proprietors.

the north side of the Mohawk River between Albany, Utica, and beyond as far as Buffalo as separate and distinct business interests. Each party was to provide and maintain his own horses and carriages, absorbing in his business any losses. The only shared expense agreed to among the parties was for any extra carriages that were needed to carry passengers across sections of the route.

Thorp & Sprague ran three types of coach accommodations, including the fastest, the "Telegraph," an express going between Albany and Buffalo.

IMAGES FROM VAULT BOOK 22, FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE SCHENECTADY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Tuesday December 25th 1832

Telegraph		
Mr. Smith	1	
" Mallard	1 1/2	Utica 9 "
" Surtin	1	Amsterdam " 25 "
\$ 9.50		
Wednesday 26 th		
Mail		
Mr. Berman	1 1/2	Amsterdam 1.50
" Wylie	1	Saratoga " 57 "
" Elapp	1	Utica 4. "
\$ 5.50		
Telegraph & Co.		
Mr. Smith	1 1/2	
" Willson	2 3/4	Utica 13.00
Post for Mr. Surtin to leave of 1/2 cent 1/2 day		
\$ 15.50		
Thursday 27 th		
Mail		
Mr. Chenman	1	Saratoga 2 "
" Sample	1	Amsterdam " 20 "
\$ 2.25		
Eclipse		
Mr. Goodell	1 1/2	
" Andel	2 1/2	
" Reynolds	1 1/2	Amsterdam 4.50
" McCallum	3	
" Wray	1	Utica 4.00
" Wicks	1	Saratoga 2. "
Post for Eclipse 1/2 cent 1/2 day 1/2 cent		
\$ 10.50		
Telegraph		
Mr. Russell	1 1/2	
" Hamilton	1 1/2	Utica 9 "
" Hayward	1	Albany 1.50
\$ 10.50		

A waybill shows the price for the "Telegraph" between Albany and Utica was \$4.50, while it was fifty cents less for the slower "Eclipse."

Total amt for Janry	\$ 351.50
" " " Febry	388.25
" " " March	425.87
" " " April	455.75
" " " May	440.50
" " " June	478.36
" " " July	442.69
" " " August	719.82
" " " September	875.78
" " " October	1158.03
" " " November	1443.21
" " " Decemb	1745.85
Total amt of Fare Rec ^d from Albany to Utica in 1832	
	\$ 9425.41

The stagecoach business was a financial success, as reflected in Thorp & Sprague's account books.

Three Accommodations

Over the whole length of this cooperative line of stage travel, there were three types of coach accommodations: the daily mail stage, with room available for passengers; a coach called the "Eclipse," for passengers wanting to be dropped off locally; and the fastest, the "Telegraph," an express, going between Albany and Buffalo in fifty-three hours. To assure swift travel for the express these regulations were posted.

A Sprague & Thorpe waybill from the stage line's account book held in the archives of the Schenectady Historical Society, which included the list of passengers and fares, shows that the price for traveling with Thorp & Sprague on the eastern portion of the line was \$4.50 for the express Telegraph between Albany and Utica, and fifty cents less for the slower Eclipse.

If there were more travelers than could be accommodated by the regular stage, additional coaches would be added, with sometimes three or four of these "extras" following the regular stage. For those who would want a stagecoach for themselves or their group alone, an "exclusive extra" could be obtained by paying a fee, usually equal to that of seven passengers.

The stagecoach business in the Mohawk Valley was a financial success for the owners. Not only were there the fares for passengers traveling on the line between Albany and Utica, but there was also the yearly reimbursement from the contract for carrying mail.

The account book for Thorp & Sprague lists the total collected from

fares for 1832 as \$9,425.41, which is equivalent to \$250,000 today. Records published in the *Official Register of the United States* for 1828 and 1829 show Thorp's stage business being reimbursed for carrying the mail at \$4,700 in 1828 and \$5,500 in 1829.

Comfort, Speed, or Safety

Public transportation through the Mohawk Valley in the early 1800s was a choice between comfort, speed, and safety. The Erie Canal packet boat was the slower, safer choice and the travel was less bumpy, but when travel time was important the stagecoach easily won out. Occasionally, this gain could be offset if there was a problem with the horses that pulled the coach, the stagecoach itself, or the condition of the road that they traveled on.

On a trip through the Mohawk Valley in 1819, Englishman John Duncan experienced breakdowns on several occasions. Not fifty miles from Albany, one of the leather straps that supported the body of the carriage broke: A nearby fence rail was selected by the driver and, with help from the passengers, it was wedged in place between the front and rear axle as a temporary replacement until the coach was replaced at the next stop. Not too many miles later, another mishap occurred during Duncan's trip: "While struggling up a very steep hill, our carriage descended into a gap with so violent a shock, that the bolt or pivot on which the front axle turned snapped in two, and the horses had nearly dragged the front wheels from under the body of the wagon. Our driver, however, was happily provided with a spare bolt, the passengers got out, a stout rail from the nearest fence was thrust under the carriage, and up to the ankles in mud, part on each side, we managed by dint of strength to

The stagecoach offered the opportunity to enjoy bucolic scenery.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

WESTERN BILL.

TIMES OF ARRIVAL AND DEPARTURE OF STAGES.

	ARRIVAL.	DEPARTURE.	DRIVERS' NAMES.
SCHENECTADY,
SWART'S,
AMSTERDAM,	5	5.5	Calvin
CAUGHNAWAGA,	8.30	9.10	Eckel
PALATINE,	11.35	12.15	Goodwin
PAILING'S,
EAST CREEK,
LITTLE FALLS,
HERKIMER,	7.5	7.5	Quale
UTICA,	10.12		..

The company kept records of schedules and drivers.

IMAGES FROM VAULT BOOK 22, FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE SCHENECTADY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

sustain the wagon until the axle was replaced in its proper position, and the new bolt inserted."

This same problem happened again later in the trip, but the travelers were unfazed, with Duncan only commenting, "We had learned the remedy for such mishaps, and soon applied ourselves to the work with energy and success."

When the first rails on the Mohawk and Hudson Railroad were laid in the summer of 1830, the end of stage travel between Albany and Utica was not far behind. It was just a year later that the steam locomotive Dewitt Clinton made its maiden trip between Albany and Schenectady, opening a new era in transportation across New York State. Ironically, the first railroad cars were modified stagecoach bodies

built by Albany carriage maker James Gould, a symbolic tribute to the mode of travel that was being pushed into the past.

At first, travel on this railway still required a ride on a stagecoach provided by Thorp & Sprague, as the end of the railroad line at both Albany and Schenectady was then at the outskirts of each city. In 1833, Thorp & Sprague's Telegraph express line changed its starting point to Schenectady, with passengers being directed to take the railroad from Albany. In late 1833, they changed the name of their stage office in Albany to Thorp & Sprague's Rail Road and General Stage and began selling tickets for the railroad. An advertisement in 1836 offers only stage travel heading east toward

Worcester, Massachusetts, with tickets available at the Thorp & Sprague stage office in Albany, and detailed information about making connections to the many railroad lines that were by then crisscrossing the region.

While the stage lines could not compete with the lower cost and faster railroads, until the age of gas-powered transportation, they held a vital place by carrying mail and passengers from the railroad stops into the surrounding countryside.

One example was the twice a week stage line that had been established in 1828 between Fonda and Johnstown that increased to twice a day after the Utica and Schenectady railroad had been completed in 1836.

Despite what passengers gained in speed and convenience on the rails, they lost much in opportunities to

experience closeup the sights and sounds of the Mohawk Valley countryside. British journalist Harriet Martineau, who passed through the Mohawk Valley via stage in 1836, described the bucolic scenes: "In a shallow reach of the river there was a line of cows wading through, to busy themselves in the luxuriant pasture of the islands in the midst of the Mohawk. In a deep part, the chain ferry-boat slowly conveyed the passengers across. The soil of the valley is remarkably rich, and the trees and verdure unusually fine. The hanging oak-woods of the ridge were beautiful and the knolls, tilled or untilled; and the little waterfalls trickling or leaping down, to join the rushing river. Little knots of houses were clustered about the locks and bridges of the canal, and here and there a village, with its white church conspicuous, spread away into the middle of the narrow valley." The railroad eventually made the stagecoach and the enjoyment of scenes like this obsolete in the Mohawk Valley. ■

The first railroad cars were modified stagecoach bodies.



Old Coach Meets Ironhorse

Keystone View Photo

THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

The Schenectady County Historical Society has the following material in their archives: B 22 - *Thorp & Sprague Account Book 1832-1834*, listing Thorp and Sprague stages with passenger lists and fees for the years 1832 to 1834, as well as waybills and other loose documents showing travel times and drivers. Special thanks to the people at the Schenectady Historical Society, Herkimer County Historical Society, and the Albany City Library Local History Room for access to materials and other assistance vital to the research for this article.



For classroom activities related to this article, see our Educator Guide at www.nysarchivestrust.org/education/educator-guide-new-york-archives-magazine