

Public Transportation in Fredonia, 1811 – 1934
By Douglas H. Shepard, 2011

Traditionally, any account of public transportation in and around Fredonia begins with a coach line of 1823. However, there is an earlier example. Although it is the only one known, it may well illustrate a more common practice than we had understood. Also, the event is interesting in itself.

By 1806 there were mail routes from the East to Buffalo and from Buffalo to Niagara Falls. Erie PA had mail received via routes from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh to Erie, but there was no route through Chautauqua County. It was not until late in 1811 that the Postal Service contracted with the Post Master in Erie PA, John Gray, to establish a route from Buffalo to Erie to, with the mail to be carried on horseback every two weeks. (The contract ran from October 1811 to December 1814.) Gray then subcontracted parts of that route. One such contractor was Richard Williams of Canadaway [Fredonia], who was to carry the mail over the Buffalo to Erie portion. Williams, in turn, subcontracted his section to two young men, one of whom was his son Abner. The other was young Nathan Cleland. Both 17 years old. Abner had the Buffalo to Canadaway route and Nathan the Canadaway to Erie. An account in *The Fredonia Censor* of 1 June 1870 gives the gist of an interview with Cleland, by then 75 years old. In February 1813, Cleland said, Abner carried not only the mail but a distinguished passenger.

The mode of transport was what Cleland called a “pung” or “jumper.” “Pung” is a New Englander’s version of an Algonquin or MicMac word “tom-pung,” originally a skid made of strong hide. In New England it usually meant an open box sled. Cleland used the term for the home-made sled or skid used when there was snow on the ground. It was “made by taking two saplings, the small ends for thills [shafts], and to the large end attaching a rude box with pins [wooden dowels] in the saplings, and cutting away the wood just forward of the box, so that they would bend, in the form of runners.” The mail went into the box and the driver used it as a seat. In this case, the driver had a passenger, Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry, 27, on his way to Erie to take command of a naval fleet on the Lakes. (The date is more likely March 1813 since various accounts state that Perry left Buffalo on 25 or 26 March arriving in Pennsylvania on the 27th.) Although almost all of the War of 1812 recruits from Canadaway joined the local militia or marched to Buffalo to defend it from the British, Abner was a rare exception. No doubt it was his intimate contact with Perry that led him to enlist in Erie for a 5-year term in the Marines, serving on Perry’s flagship, the *Lawrence*, and dying there in the Battle of Lake Erie.

There must have been other occasions when this kind of vehicle carrying the mail had a paying passenger as well. However, by 1821 the population had increased enough that the U.S. Post Office found it economically feasible to begin using what were called “stage wagons” to deliver the mail between Buffalo and Erie, passing through Fredonia. The stage wagon was a four-wheeled vehicle with open sides designed to carry mail and passengers. It had no springs, the benches for the passengers were made of wood and were backless, and the wagon’s top was canvas. They were later modified to add roll-up curtains, backrests and suspension straps or springs for the seats. Considering what the roads were like, it would not be going too far to say it must have been an unforgettable experience to be a passenger then.

The Fredonia Censor of 29 October 1823 commenting on local improvements noted that “[b]ut two years ago there was no such thing as a stage between Buffalo and Erie, and the mail was carried but once a week on horse back.” Again, in the issue of 7 June 1826 the improvement was emphasized. “Five years ago the only means of public conveyance through this county was a stage wagon passing once a week from Buffalo to Erie.” One definite change for the better was replacing stage wagons with stage coaches. The *Censor* of 2 February 1825 expressed some astonishment at the pace of improvement. “To those who passed through this village four or five years ago by the then only public conveyance, which was a stage wagon with one span of horses, which travelled once a week from Buffalo to Erie, it will

undoubtedly be a matter of astonishment, to be informed that a *daily line of post coaches* (which for the present however, will be exchanged for stage sleighs) is now established between Buffalo and Erie; and so well supported has this line been, that an opposition line, to run on the same route three times a week, is to be put in operation next week.”

One of the obstacles to better transportation mentioned over and over again was the miserable state of the roads. As early as December 1823 three men in Erie County were preparing to apply to the Legislature for “an act of incorporation to construct a Turnpike road from Buffalo to Cattaraugus creek, near its mouth.” Turnpiking meant improving the condition of a road at considerable expense and paying for it by having toll booths, turnpikes, at various intervals along that route. The *Censor* of 14 April 1824 reported “[w]ith much pleasure . . . that a bridge is this season to be erected over Cattaraugus creek, near its mouth When a bridge shall be built over Eighteen Mile creek, between Cattaraugus and Buffalo it will divest the road of the terror which has always been attached to it by traveler and the emigrant During the first settlement of this section of country, a piece of road near Cattaraugus, commonly called and generally known as the *four mile woods*, and which was in fact a most intolerable road struck a dread upon every one who was under the necessity of passing over it.”

Along with the more frequent coach trips and the gradually improving roads came the other side of the coin. The *Dunkirk Advertiser* as reported in the *Censor* early in 1824 noted, “*Stage Robbery*.— Within a few days the stage between this city and Schenectady has been robbed” However, things continued to look up. In the 23 February 1825 issue of the *Censor* we learn that “[t]he quickest intelligence we have ever received from Washington, was that received last week, by the way of Pittsburgh, which brought the result of the Presidential election.— The choice, which was made on Wednesday the 9th, reached this place on the Wednesday following. The information was brought on the stage way-bill.” And on March 2nd “[b]y the postrider on the route from this village to Perry, we learn that a murder was committed in the town of Hamburg, Erie county. . . .”

New postal routes meant post-coaches carrying passengers where such public transportation had previously not existed. In April 1825 one was established “[f]rom Fredonia, by Gerry and St. Clairsville [*sic*] to Jamestown, in Chautauque county.” A line of stages to run *daily* between Buffalo and Erie was begun late in 1825 and was so successful that another company was formed to run a daily line which began on 3 January 1826. By February a line of stages to run twice a week between Fredonia and Dunkirk was begun, as well as a connecting line running from Fredonia to Jamestown. Of course increased traffic brought increased opportunities for accidents. On 21 February “[o]ne of the old line stages, which left this place [Fredonia] yesterday morning for Buffalo, broke through the ice on the lake, about one mile from Lay’s tavern.” The four horses were lost, but the mail bag was saved, as were the passengers. That the iced over lake was found preferable is, by the way, a clear indication of how bad the roads continued to be.

However, help was on the way. Unfortunately it was often too expensive to use. An article in the *Censor* of 8 March 1826 gives the interesting details. [The Erie Canal had been completed and was a great success, for those living near enough to take advantage of it. As compensation the Legislature agreed to create a road from the Hudson River west through the middle or southern tier of western New York.] “As the joint committee have recommended the construction of the State Road on the McAdams plan, we copy the following explanation of that plan from the report:—

“The art of road making has been within a few years very much improved in England, by the ingenuity of Mr. McAdams. The outlines of his plan are, to remove every species of timber and vegetable matter from the bed of the road, to sink ditches on each side, generally about fifteen inches below the surface or centre, and to cover that part of the road over which loaded carriages are to pass, with very fine

pounded stone; these, by the pressure of the wheels of carriages, will gradually unite into a solid mass, and thus a road is formed, which cannot be affected either by the frost or the by the most rainy seasons.”

A few comments are called for here. John Loudon McAdam was born in Scotland in 1756. He removed to New York in 1770, made a fortune and returned to Scotland in 1778, where he became involved with road building. As surveyor to the Bristol Turnpike Trust in 1816, he decided to rebuild the roads under his jurisdiction according to the techniques he had developed over the years. Basically this was to make a road bed formed with a camber, a slight gentle rise in the middle, to have rain water drain off rapidly. A firm base of large stones was laid first, over which was a layer of crushed stone bound with gravel. This new type of road bed became known as “macadamisation” or “macadam.” Others later added various tar combinations known as “tarmacadam” or “tarmac.” This was obviously a laborious and expensive process, which explains why it was little used in rural areas for a long time.

More coach routes and improved coach design were the important changes over the next few years, as well as improved roadbeds, but it was the advent of the railroad, oddly enough, that encouraged new forms of public transportation in and around Fredonia. One of the innovations in road building was the plank road. Originating in Russia, it was exactly what its name suggests. The actual construction of such a road was fairly complicated, but basically it consisted of wooden planks laid down to provide a firmer and smoother surface than its rutted, dusty or swampy predecessor had been. The techniques for building such a road were imported from Russia via Canada in the person of the Governor General, Lord Sydenham, who had earlier served in Russia. The roads he had built in 1839 through 1841 near Toronto were models for the first to be built in America. That was in 1845-46, a road running between Syracuse and Oneida Lake, some 14 miles.

By January 1849 the newspapers began to be filled with accounts of plank roads built and reports on plank road companies forming. Locally a petition was presented to the village Trustees requesting that a plank road be permitted to be built on Dunkirk Street (Central Avenue), Temple Street and Water Street. It was known by then that the Erie Railroad would be laying track into Dunkirk, so various groups began preparing an improved road along what had been a notorious way, today’s Central Avenue. The brush, brambles, windfall and other debris were removed, mud holes filled in, the surface leveled and finally the planks laid, making a new and improved access to Dunkirk and its railroad station. That was in 1850. When the first railroad cars of the New York and Erie R.R. arrived in Dunkirk on 15 May 1851, it gave impetus to some local businessmen to inaugurate the omnibus line, which used a large, horse-drawn carriage. It began running on the new plank road to and from the Dunkirk depot in March 1852.

It is no coincidence that Central Avenue, which for a long time had had a total of two houses — Squire Morton’s at today’s 108 Central Avenue and Samuel Pier’s about at 316 Central Avenue — suddenly became *the* place to build. By the time of the 1854 map of the Village of Fredonia, there are seven mostly new houses strung out up to the Dunkirk line, and the trend has continued to our day.

The first omnibus line was begun by B.W. Cotton and James P. Mullett in 1852. By April 1859 they had rival lines running on Central Avenue, in July 1859 Mullett and F.B. Parker were the competition to Cotton’s line, and by November 1859 Parker bought out Mullett and made a deal with Cotton to alternate their runs during the day. An early announcement in the *Censor* of 24 June 1851 was actually an advertisement for the Johnson House hotel (at today’s 1 Park Place) using the new mode of transportation as a plus for the hotel. A good reason to stay there was that “[o]mnibusses run half hourly from this House to Dunkirk.” In addition “[s]tages [stage coaches] leave daily for Buffalo, Erie . . .” A sample time table from 1856 illustrates the kind of convenience the omnibus provided and how much more service was being offered only five years later. Daily, one left Fredonia at 7:30 A.M. to meet the Buffalo and State Line trains going both east and west. At 9:00 and again at 10:00 an omnibus left to carry passengers into the village of Dunkirk itself. At 11:00 the trip was to meet the Buffalo and State

Line "Lightning Express West," at 1:30 for the same line heading east, at 2:30 to meet the New York and Erie Night Express East, at 4:30 to meet the Buffalo and State Line "Way Express West," and at 6:30 to meet the same line's Lightning Express East, the Night Express West, and the New York and Erie Cincinnati Express East." Connections galore.

The plank roads which had seemed so promising at first, turned out to be money losers eventually. The one from Dunkirk to Jamestown *via* Stockton and the one from Fredonia to Jamestown by way of Sinclearville both failed. Despite that, there was talk, beginning in January 1862, about building a street railroad between Dunkirk and Fredonia. It was about then that the old planks were removed and Central Avenue's surface repaired, at which point the suggestion was made that it be formally named. What had been called the "Dunkirk Road" and the "Dunkirk Plank Road," was now to be named Central Avenue with the official naming taking place in April 1864, the same time that the legislation authorizing a street railroad was being passed. A company was organized on 12 September 1865 to build the street railroad connecting Fredonia with the Lake Shore and the New York & Erie depots. (A street railroad merely meant that the old horse-drawn omnibuses would be fitted out with new wheels or replaced by wheeled cars to run on tracks laid along the street.) In the legislation, the company was referred to as the Fredonia & Dunkirk Horse Railroad.

Through a good part of 1866, stock in the company was being sold, and the contract was finally awarded on 20 June to J.N. Greene of Medina NY, "formerly of this place." New cars were purchased and the first trip from Dunkirk to Fredonia took place on December 25th 1866. It was the first street railroad constructed anywhere between Buffalo and Cleveland. A rider very early in its career wrote a letter praising the service. "Fredonia — Having business in this place, we made a short trip last week by way of Salamanca and Dunkirk. At the latter place we stepped from the depot aboard of the street cars for Fredonia. This road has been in successful operation for several weeks. — the cars are new, well built and commodious, and the road doing a fine business. — There were over thirty passengers on our trip and frequently fifty passengers find sitting and standing room, though well packed. The street cars make two more trips per day than the omnibus did, and carry each trip double to three times the passengers. Arrangements are being made to put on freight cars, which will largely increase the business. The road is leased to a company who run it for 45 per cent. of the receipts, leaving 55 per cent. to pay stockholders. When the road was built, stockholders subscribed more for the benefit they expected to receive in convenience and increased value of real estate than anything else, but as things look now the road will pay a handsome dividend in cash."

One dividend that had not been in the company's plans was the acquisition of one of only four Normal Schools to be built in the state. It was generally agreed that without the street railroad to make Fredonia accessible to the depots in Dunkirk, very few students or their families would have agreed to come here. This may also be true of the increase in the number of lecturers, musicians, acting companies and the like who began to include Fredonia on their circuits, and that includes Mark Twain, who lectured here on the evening of 10 January 1870. He wrote to his agent, "I left Buffalo at 4 PM yesterday, went to Dunkirk, & thence out to Fredonia by horse-car, (3 miles), rattled my lecture through took horse-car again & just caught 9:45 P.M. train bound east."

By March 1889 the line was doing so well, the company decided to upgrade its facilities on Center Street. The *Censor* of 27 March reported, "The Dunkirk & Fredonia Street Railroad company is laying the foundation for a new car house on Center street. The shops in the rear will be used for stables, and the front of the large building already on their property will be fitted up for a depot and storage room." (The change was seen as advantageous to more than just the company.) "If this move should lead to the demolition of the old Park House [1 Park Place] barns, which the company has heretofore occupied, it would be one of the greatest improvements that ever happened to Center street, and all that neighborhood, including the public square [Barker Common]."

One stipulation in the original agreement with the Village that later caused much difficulty was that the rails the horse cars were to run on had to lie six feet east from the center of the road, apparently to be out of the way of saddle horses and other horse-drawn vehicles. That street railroad lasted until 1891 when M.M. Fenner was President of the D & F Street Railroad and had it converted to an electric system, fed by a powerhouse at 12 Center Street. The powerhouse also supplied electricity to Fenner's patent medicine factory at Center and Barker streets as well as selling its excess steam to heat nearby homes and shops. To guarantee that the arrangement would last, on 6 August 1894, the Dunkirk & Fredonia R.R. Co. agreed to supply electricity for lights in the Village Hall.

Early in the morning of 25 January 1900 a devastating fire destroyed buildings on West Main at Center Street as well as all the buildings of the D&F Street Railroad complex, including all of the cars. The only things that survived were the boilers in the power house. There was a ripple effect in the community, since the loss of the power house meant no street cars, no electric lights, no electric power to homes or businesses, and no steam heat. The boilers were soon hooked up to a natural gas supply and steam heat was restored in a few days. As to the street cars, two horse cars were borrowed from Jamestown and pressed into service. Horses had to be obtained as well, since the company had sold its entire stable in April 1892.

In addition to the interruptions caused by the fire, there was a change in track placement at the beginning of the 1900s. It was decided to pave Central Avenue with tar macadam so that, perhaps with automobiles in mind, the Village Charter was amended to have the rails laid down the center of the street. By May 1900 the new rails were in place as far as Newton Street (coming from the north) and by August completed to Temple Street. Another change was due to the increased traffic on the line. That came in 1907 when it was found necessary to lay a double track from the Erie Hotel in Dunkirk to the City line. Objections by some home owners prevented the double track from continuing into Fredonia. Instead, what was called the "Fenner Switch" was laid, a short side track allowing an oncoming car to pull out and let another one pass in the opposite direction on the Fredonia portion of the line.

The opposition to a double track within Fredonia came from property owners whose house lots were measured from the center of Central Avenue, but a compromise was reached in 1909; a double track could be laid if the center of the avenue was paved with brick, while the Village paved either side of the tracks with tar macadam. By mid-May 1909 a temporary track was laid very close to the east curb of Central Avenue, and by June, 2500 feet of double track was in place. (The old rails from the center of the avenue were taken up and stored to eventually be used on East Main Street.) After some delay, the west track and the brick paving reached Newton Street by mid-August. As the bricks were laid, two cement mixers followed along, pouring cement on the brick base. Finally, by the beginning of November 1909, cars began running on the double track on Central Avenue for the first time.

It is necessary to point out that having this form of public transportation in the Village was not really what was important. Rather it was that the street cars connected with a network of other street rail lines and railroads. Back in 1891 the *Censor* of 29 July had commented that "[t]he street cars now run through to the Nickle Plate depot on the new track . . . and when the W.N.Y. & P. cars run into the exchange street depot at Buffalo, as they will soon, it will be more than ever the popular route with the traveling public . . . Our first [earliest] street car connects with the accommodation at 6:50 a.m. and it is the only road on which you can return from Buffalo in the evening." By May 1900 track was being laid from the Lake Shore station out to Point Gratiot, and the line began operating in July 1901. Closer to home, the Fredonia Board of Trustees on 16 December 1901 considered a petition from the Lake Shore Traction Co. to build an electric trolley line through the village on Main Street. (Other municipalities

along the route from Westfield to Silver Creek were petitioned in the same way.) The power station was to be built in Fredonia. The franchise was approved in January 1902 stipulating that the line was to be completed through Pomfret within one year and the entire road within two.

The road through the village was to be a single track running down the center of Main Street with wires at least 18 feet above the street, and the franchise was to run for 99 years. Construction began at the Westfield end, although Brocton blocked access for a time. In October 1902 the Dunkirk & Point Gratiot owners added new partners from Cleveland and planned to extend their line through to Buffalo *via* Sheridan: from Dunkirk out Roberts Road to the Main road and then east to Buffalo. If that line went through, it was agreed that the Lake Shore Traction Co. would connect with it at Roberts Road.

The next step was for the Dunkirk to Buffalo company to buy out the Lake Shore Traction Co. and operate the entire Main road line as the Buffalo, Fredonia & Western R.R. Co., and the other part as the Buffalo, Dunkirk & Western Railway. (In this period, the newspapers had often referred to the lines by the names of the owners or major stockholders. The road from Westfield east to the Sheridan line had become the "Nixon-Green line," the Point Gratiot portion was the "Toomey-Connors" line, and the road from Erie to Westfield was the "Vandergrift Co.") What follows is, unfortunately, a somewhat confusing series of plans, name changes and other alterations.

Early in November 1902 the Cleveland partners met with a representative of the Lake Shore Traction Co. in a bid to buy it, the new conglomerate to be known as the Buffalo, Fredonia & Western R.R. Co. operating under the original charters of the Dunkirk & Point Gratiot and the Lake Shore Traction companies. The Highway Commission met in Silver Creek on 29 November 1902 and granted a franchise to the Dunkirk & Point Gratiot Traction Co. to build a line through the Town of Dunkirk, and on 8 December 1902 the Lake Shore Traction Co. was consolidated with the Toomey-Connors Co.

In January 1903 the Lake Shore Traction Co. met a temporary setback, differing with the Westfield trustees over a paving issue, but the road surveyors did reach Fredonia by mid-February 1903. It was in March 1903 that the Dunkirk & Point Gratiot and the Lake Shore Traction companies joined to become the Buffalo, & Western Railroad Co. In April 1903 another company laid track east from North East PA to the Westfield village limits, just when the Buffalo, Dunkirk & Western R.R. Co. was refused a franchise through West Seneca. However, at the same time, construction began from the Fredonia village line west. The original plan was to have the single track come along the south side of West Main Street to the top of West Hill then go through the village in the center of the street. (The Buffalo Construction Co., a subsidiary of the traction company, did the actual work on the road.)

The track down West Hill to the Main Street bridge was laid by 9 September 1903. The poles for the wires were in place opposite the Columbia Hotel (1 Park Place, and the track was laid that far, by mid-October, with power for this part of the line coming from the D&F Co. power house on Center Street.

Surveying from the Hotel along East Main Street ran from October through November 1903; track was laid to Eagle Street by mid-November and to Green Street (today's Cushing Street) by December. The section of the line going west from Fredonia reached the center of Brocton by 8 December 1903 and a test run was made to Lamberton that day and to Brocton on the 9th. This was followed on the 10th by an official trip with all the company's local dignitaries aboard. The schedule for this segment of the line was to have the cars leave for Brocton every hour and return from Brocton every half hour.

Laying the line from Fredonia further west continued in 1904, but the parent company began having financial problems. Despite being granted a year's extension on their franchise in July 1904, by March 1906 they still had not raised enough money to extend the trolley line east to Sheridan. Later in

1904 the Dunkirk & Point Gratiot line was leased to the D&F Street Railway Co., and a new, larger dynamo was installed in the Center Street power house in August. It provided power to its own street railway, to the Dunkirk & Point Gratiot line, and to the Main Road trolleys of the Buffalo, Dunkirk and Western R.R. Co, as well. With the previous franchise for the Dunkirk to Sheridan route along Roberts Road having lapsed, it was then awarded to the D&F R.R. Co. on 3 March 1906.

Then came a surprise announcement on 12 March. A New York syndicate had purchased the Erie line to Westfield, the Buffalo, Dunkirk & Western line from Brocton to Fredonia, and the street railway from Fredonia to Dunkirk. The plan was to fill in the gaps and create a single complete line from Erie PA through to Buffalo with the stipulation that the line would run on Central Avenue and out Roberts Road. The newly created company was the Buffalo & Lake Erie Traction Company.

New, heavier track was laid in Fredonia, and by December 1908 full service was available between Buffalo and Erie by way of Dunkirk and Fredonia. In April 1909 the new company agreed to continue the trolley line out East Main Street in Fredonia to the town line. It was expected that the same agreement would be made with the Town of Pomfret to extend the line to Sheridan. Work on the road began in mid-May 1910, and by June the rails were laid to Bennett Road. However, that is as far as they went. The line remained in use but, with the advent of the automobile, it began to lose customers. By April 1925 there was continuing discussion about abandoning that East Main Street route. In August 1927 it was agreed with the company that they could abandon the line, leaving the tracks until East Main Street was repaved.

It may not have been understood at the time, but this was a clear sign of what the future held. With the development of the internal combustion engine, it was only a matter of time before the fixed-route electric trolleys were replaced by gasoline-powered buses. In 1925 the Buffalo & Erie Railway Co., a trolley line company, formed a subsidiary, the Buffalo & Erie Coach Corp. *The Fredonia Censor* of 27 July 1927 announced that “twenty-one passenger motor coaches of the Buffalo & Erie Coach Corp. were put in service Monday morning. The service is for interstate passenger traffic between Buffalo and Erie . . . Eastbound coaches will turn at Fredonia, and west bound at Roberts road, so that both will pass through Dunkirk.”

By July 1932 Eastern Greyhound Lines, Inc. and the West Ridge Transportation company (a bus service between Erie and Cleveland), were vying for permits to operate through Pomfret, opposed, of course, by the B & E Coach Corp. By February 1933 the electric trolleys of the B & E Railway Co. were replaced by buses, except for a few on the original line between Dunkirk and Fredonia, and by 1934 the trolleys were gone, the rails were being covered with blacktop, and, as the *Censor* of 13 October 1932 had very dramatically noted, “the motor car has arrived and an ancient institution gives way before the changing life of the people. So passed Rome before the attacks of the invaders.”

What the *Censor* did not note was the curious arc of history that had occurred. We began with the individual saddle horse or horse and carriage, partly replaced by the stage wagon, the stage coach, and the horse-drawn omnibus, which progressed to the horse-drawn railway, to the electric-powered trolley, replaced by the modern omnibus — the gasoline-powered ‘bus — only to fall victim to the modern equivalent of the horse and buggy, the automobile. We have arrived back where we started, and now can only wait to see what the next turn of the wheel will bring.