An RS3 hauls a Berkshire train north of Canaan in September 1954. This train has just entered Massachusetts and will stop at Sheffield.

*Thomas J. McNamara*
CHAPTER FOUR

Berkshire Line: The New Haven’s Route to the Hills

The Berkshire Line originated as the combination of the Housatonic Railroad, which opened between Bridgeport and Canaan, Connecticut, in 1842; and the Berkshire Railroad, which was built from the Massachusetts line northward to two junctions with the Western Railroad of Massachusetts (later Boston & Albany), one at Pittsfield, and one at State Line (Massachusetts/New York). This was a logical route for a railroad. In its 110-mile run from Pittsfield to Long Island Sound, the Housatonic River drops 1,015 feet in elevation and thus was an excellent source of water power to drive the mills of that era (as it still is, to drive today’s hydroelectric plants).

Additionally, the northwest hills of Connecticut and the Berkshires of Massachusetts are areas of tremendous scenic beauty that over the years became enduringly popular vacation destinations. In Connecticut the railroad passes through the towns of Brookfield, New Milford, Kent, Cornwall, and Canaan; and in Massachusetts it passes through Sheffield, Great Barrington, Stockbridge, Lee, and Lenox, before terminating in the city of Pittsfield.

Considering how early in the history of railroading the Housatonic Railroad began operating, one can only imagine how primitive some of its equipment must have been. Unfortunately there are no photographs of such an early era.
The Merwinsville Hotel

The construction of almost every segment of the American rail network had some sort of land scam or swindle, and the Berkshire was no exception. In his book, *Country Depots in the Connecticut Hills*, Robert F. Lord describes the exploits of Sylvanus Merwin, a hotel operator in the northern section of New Milford. Railroad surveyors seeking the best route for the railroad stayed at his hotel. Merwin overheard them and purchased land on this route and built a hotel. Merwin then “insisted that trains make meal stops at the hotel on trips between Bridgeport and Pittsfield. He also stipulated that a ticket office be established at the hotel and that he be appointed as agent . . . The station was to be called Merwinsville.”

The Housatonic acceded to Merwin’s demands. Once dining cars were added to the trains in 1877, the meal layover ended. The Merwin family continued to man the station until the early 1900s when the New Haven, which had absorbed the Housatonic in
1892, replaced Merwin's son-in-law, the agent at the time, who said that if New Haven replaced him that it could no longer use the hotel as station. The New Haven relocated its station to a freight office south of the hotel in 1908, and built a new station in 1918. The station name was promptly changed to Gaylordsville, the proper name of that section of New Milford. The hotel, which is still standing today, was restored by local residents as a museum and is used for local events.

**Putting Together the New York-Berkshire Route**

The line did not acquire its more familiar routing until two later railroads in Connecticut were built: the 24-mile Danbury & Norwalk Railroad between its namesake communities in 1852 and the five-mile New York, Housatonic & Northern between Danbury and Brookfield Junction in 1881. These two newer routes provided the Housatonic a more efficient gateway to and from New York, plus access to the highly industrialized Danbury area. By 1887 these two smaller railroads were leased to the Housatonic.

Despite its history of growth by leasing smaller carriers in its area, the Housatonic was never really a prosperous company. After losing its investment in a failed 1891 business venture to operate its part of a combined NY&NE/LIRR car-ferry-rail service between New York and Boston via Wilson Point in South Norwalk, the Housatonic Railroad was taken over by the New York, New Haven, & Hartford Railroad in 1892.
Berkshire Train Service
From the time of the New Haven's acquisition of the Berkshire Line through the first couple of decades of the 1900s, the volume of train service on this line was considerable. By that time, the original Housatonic routing north from Bridgeport had become a secondary branch; and by about 1911 the New Haven had given the portion from Botsford to Hawleyville, Connecticut, a new identity and an upgrading as part of its Maybrook freight gateway. The passenger routing via Danbury to the Berkshire had evolved into the primary one. During that era there were generally two passenger roundtrips between New York and
Pittsfield. The lonely outpost of Brookfield Junction, five miles north of Danbury, was a busy location as two roundtrips between New Haven and Pittsfield connected there with the New York trains and followed them to Pittsfield, making all the local stops. Southbound, the Pittsfield–New Haven locals ran ahead of the two New York trains that only made a few stops. There was also a mixed train that operated between Bridgeport and Pittsfield via a Brookfield Junction connection. Until 1903, passenger trains operating through Danbury stopped at the ramshackle stub-end Main Street station built by the Danbury & Norwalk Railroad in 1871. The New Haven replaced it with a new station that opened in July 1903. With its distinctive loop track, the new station enabled, for the first time, straight-through operation of passenger trains between New York and Pittsfield.

The nights belonged to the freights. In 1900 there were as many as five night freights operating with timetable meeting points. It was also the era when the New Haven double-tracked a number of its
secondary routes, and that strategy extended to the Berkshire. In 1913 a second main track was put in between Berkshire Junction and New Milford, including a gauntlet on the through truss bridge crossing the Housatonic River at New Milford. This project was the first step in a Morgan plan to establish the Berkshire as a link in a New York to Montreal route. The plan never came to fruition and throughout its short life, the second main track, which was removed from service in 1928, was always superfluous.

**Equipment on the Berkshire**

The number of locomotives based in Danbury and assigned to Berkshire trains was sizable enough that substantial new engine servicing facilities were constructed in Danbury in 1916. These included an 8-stall engine house, a 95-foot turntable, and a huge wood coaling dock located next to a large wood water tank. Measurements of the remaining footings show this coal dock was 84 feet long, and photographs suggest it was about 50 feet high. With those dimensions, the massive structure towered over railroad’s Danbury facilities.

Trains on New Haven’s secondary mains, including the Berkshire, were usually assigned equipment a generation older than that found on mainline trains. The G-4 class 4-6-0s (built from 1904 to 1907) were displaced in mainline service by the I-1 Pacifics (built from 1907 to 1910), which were in turn displaced by the I-2s (built in 1913), and then by the I-4s (built in 1916). As each new generation of power showed up, the older class appeared on the Berkshire. Photos and records indicate the American A class 4-4-0s (built from 1896 to 1903) that handled Berkshire passenger trains early in the 1900s were displaced by the G class by 1912. By 1924 the usual passenger engines were I-1 Pacifics.

As with locomotive assignments, hand-me-down passenger equipment was normally assigned to the line, some for an amazingly long time. Photographic evidence shows that some old wooden dining cars were still operating on the daily passenger train as late as 1938. Hand-me-down they may have been, but they were first class. All of the line’s daily passenger trains carried a parlor or buffet-parlor car until 1940. The Berkshire Line enjoyed some well-heeled clientele to patronize this first-class service, particularly in
the summer months. The upper-crust passengers came to the line beginning around the 1880s—the Gilded Age of the late nineteenth century—when wealthy New Yorkers began to build summer cottages in the area around Stockbridge and Lenox, Massachusetts, and stations on the line served both. The owners and guests of those elegant properties provided the New Haven a reliable and high-volume summer weekend business for decades. One can imagine the likes of Joseph Hodges Choate, Giraud Foster, Ambassador Henry White and his wife Emily Thorn Vanderbilt, furniture magnate William Sloane, novelist Edith Wharton, and their neighbors descending from a New Haven parlor car on a summer evening at the distinctive Oriental-style station in Stockbridge. Fortunately, a number of their cottages survive today as historic sites, upscale country inns, and private schools or have been incorporated into resorts. The Berkshire Line stations in those towns also survive in a variety of non-railroad uses. A persistent local tradition says the famous architect, Stanford K. White, designed the Stockbridge station, which was built in 1893. However, architectural historians have failed to find any proof of this, so it remains only local lore.

By 1926 Berkshire Line operations assumed the form that remained through the 1950s. The connecting services through Brookfield Junction ended and passenger service consisted of two daily New York–Pittsfield roundtrips and extra weekend runs. The exception was one Great Barrington–Pittsfield commuter roundtrip, which in the 1920s consisted of one of the railroad's early rail buses. In 1931 the passenger trains on the line were renumbered in the 138–149 series and retained these numbers until the end of the New Haven.

From the early 1930s through the end of the steam era, the normal passenger power was the 1300-series I-2 Pacifics. These 72-inch drivered engines were perfect for Berkshire service. Although the
Train No. 143 heads south at Berkshire Junction onto the double-track line into Danbury in May 1959. There the RS3 524 will come off and an electric motor will complete the run to New York. No. 143 had a special role for many years—hauling money. At Pittsfield, an express or baggage car was added to the rear end and had a carload of currency paper manufactured by the Crane Company in Dalton, just east of Pittsfield. No. 143 took this car to Stamford for same-night pick up by No. 179 to Penn Station for early morning arrival in Washington, D.C., for morning placement on the Bureau of Printing and Engraving siding. J. W. Swanberg

38-mile climb from the bottom of the line at New Milford (elevation 206 feet) to Canaan (elevation 669 feet) was unremarkable for the most part, punctuated by only one short stretch of 0.82 percent grade around Falls Village, this stretch had six station stops and many speed-restricted curves as the line wound its way along the banks of the Housatonic. North of Canaan where the railroad enters Massachusetts, the Housatonic Valley opens out into a broad, flat plain that extends through Sheffield to Great Barrington (elevation 718 feet). North of there the railroad winds upgrade along the river banks to Pittsfield (elevation 1,015 feet), with only one area of 0.85 percent grade around Glendale.

**Postwar Changes**

By the beginning of World War II some of the panache of the line's passenger service was vanishing. Daily (except Sunday) trains No. 140 and No. 143 that ran north from New York in the morning and south from Pittsfield in the early afternoon lost their daily parlor car in 1940 and trains 141–144, the *Berkshire Expresses* that ran south from Pittsfield in the early morning and returned from New York in the late afternoon, lost their parlor car in 1942. After that, parlor car service operated only on one weekend roundtrip that went north on Saturday afternoon until 1949, when it changed to Friday evening, and returned south Sunday evening. Food service in the form of a Café-Coach was provided on the *Berkshire Expresses* except that it ran south on Sunday evening rather than Monday morning.

The last few years of steam operation on the Berkshire in the 1940s were arguably the most interesting. During the summer the Sunday morning train 138 ran to Pittsfield with double-headed I-2s. The second locomotive was a power move for Sunday evening train 149 from Pittsfield.
In June 1959, two FL-9s replaced the RS3 that hauled No. 143 and other Berkshire trains for a decade. The units wait at Brockfield, Connecticut, as No. 143 completes its station work. The FL-9s continues into New York without changing at Danbury, eight miles to the south.

J. W. Swanberg

An F-1 Pacific is north of Lee, Massachusetts, in 1928. In less than half an hour this northbound train will reach Pittsfield. Collection of J. W. Swanberg
The season for savoring such operation was brief because diesels came early to the Berkshire. The Danbury yard switcher was assigned an Alco diesel in 1940. The first diesel to appear out in road service was the Alco Black Maria demonstrator, which spent a couple of days there in August 1946. Alco’s RS2 demonstrator operated on the Berkshire in February 1947. Evidently that RS2 earned some gold stars for its operation on the line because the New Haven promptly ordered 10 RS2s and assigned all 10 to the Berkshire. The first two of these orange and green road switchers, numbered 0500 and 0501, were delivered from Schenectady to State Line in December 1947 and immediately entered passenger service, which ended both passenger and freight regular steam operation on the Berkshire in January 1948.

In 1951 the RS2s were displaced in Berkshire service by higher-horsepower RS3s. Through most of the 1950s the usual assignments were a single unit to most passenger trains, two units to Friday train 144 and Sunday train 147, and two units occasionally to other trains if needed. The passenger consists were still, as they had been for decades, one-generation-old equipment. The assignment of heavyweight parlors and diners continued through 1957, by which time they had become just about the last assignments anywhere on the railroad for this equipment. A significant 1958 reduction of Shore Line train service freed up some stainless steel coaches and parlor cars so that newer equipment was regularly seen on Berkshire trains. Early in 1959, FL9s appeared on the line. For a while they were seen only on the weekend trains, but by the end of 1959 they held down most Berkshire passenger jobs to eliminate the Danbury engine change.

Service Declines in the 1960s
The axe fell on Berkshire passenger trains in January 1960, when the Railway Post Office (RPO) that had operated on both weekday passenger roundtrips made its last run. That RPO route was selected for elimination because the train schedules were unsuitable for mail. The railroad would have needed to operate an evening RPO departure from Pittsfield and a northbound leaving New York about 3 a.m., and no such schedule had ever existed. Since weekday passenger counts had dropped to the point where through trains were no longer justified, the railroad quickly began experimenting with Budd RDC connections at Danbury. In March 1960, a timetable change reduced all passenger trains except for two weekend roundtrips to RDCs. All dining service was
By 1958 the heavyweight parlor car run on the Berkshire was replaced by a stainless-steel car due to reductions in Shore Line trains. This car, the New Rochelle, sits in Pittsfield on a Sunday afternoon in 1967, awaiting departure on Train 147 for New York.

J. W. Swanberg

eliminated, but the Friday northbound and Sunday southbound parlor car continued and the patronage of the weekend trains remained healthy. In November 1960 the last New Haven train departed from the Boston & Albany station in Pittsfield. The next day they began originating and terminating at the refurbished New Haven freight house a few blocks away.

By 1963 the bankrupt New Haven was desperately looking for any possible cost cutting, and finally in March 1964 it convinced the Interstate Commerce Commission to authorize discontinuance of all Berkshire passenger trains except the two weekend New York–Pittsfield through roundtrip trains. With this the service assumed the shape it kept until the Penn Central takeover in January 1969. PC quickly eliminated the parlor cars and downgraded the two weekend runs to RDCs that continued until Amtrak began in May 1971.

It is Sunday afternoon at the New Haven's small Pittsfield passenger station, a converted freight house. In May 1962, train 435 with two RDCs departs for Danbury, where its passengers will change to the coaches on Train 145 for New York. The Berkshire only saw two RDCs on the weekends, since the second one ran south from Danbury to South Norwalk on weekdays.

J. W. Swanberg