

**Digging Deeper With Doug Ellison
Number 3 in a Series
The Mystery Of Signal 240.3 At Earleville, NY**



David Mainey has captured an elusive and long sought after photo of Signal 240.3. We are looking north towards the West Main Street crossing and the depot (ca. late 1940's). The depression-era hobo camp was to the immediate right, about 25 feet between the signal and the Chenango River. The Signal indicates Proceed in the position pictured.

I grew up in Earlville, NY, but by the 1960's the O&W was but a fading scar on the landscape, and a distant memory of the folks around town. However, there was enough left to entrance a budding rail enthusiast to poke over the ashes and through the encroaching vegetation to unravel and discover the many mysteries and nuances of "what had been".

Many days were spent walking the roadbed, prowling through the old Consumer's Dairy Milk Plant, collecting spikes and tie plates, inspecting the depot and other activities to better discover and understand what the Mighty O&W was all about. One point of interest was the remains of an old semaphore signal. In the late 1960's, a group of us in town created the O&W Club. The terms of membership being that one had to buy a copy of William F. Helmer's O&W book, which at the time was five dollars. Three or four of us would get together from time to time to comb the roadbed from Smyrna to Earlville to salvage whatever we could find. Date nails, insulators, tie plates, bolts, washers and angle bars were the trophies we brought home most often. But one thing we could not bring home was any part of the remains of the semaphore signal about 3/10s of a mile south of the depot. A **concrete foundation** and **battery box** were the remnants left along with leftovers from a long ago depression era hobo camp. We, even as 10 year old kids, were savvy enough to understand that there had been a signal here and what the debris of the hobo camp was all about and wondered what the signal meant and might have looked like. The spot was sort of a magnet and often drew us in to scrounge, wonder and meditate.



Signal Mast Foundation as it appeared on March 27, 2010 (Doug Ellison)



Battery Box on March 27, 2010 (Doug Ellison)

Many years later I was reminiscing with my Uncle Tom Hartshorn who had grown up in Earlville a generation before me. We found we had much in common and got to talking about the O&W, which not only had he seen in operation, but also the West Shore line from Syracuse. He asked if I knew there was a signal south of the depot and I acknowledged most certainly, and then he mentioned the abandoned hobo camp. Apparently in the mid-1940's it had also been an attraction and magnet for him and his friends in the day when the O&W was steam powered. In his day it was part of the operating railroad, and the hobo camp was fresh although derelict. Once again, I thought it would be really something to find out more about that signal - maybe someone had wandered back in there and taken a picture. Well one could dream.

In the 1990's I was General Manager of the Adirondack Scenic Railroad, and had known of Gus Kervin who lived in Clinton, NY and was a retired O&W signal maintainer with territory out of Hamilton. Gus's territory did not include Earlville unless working relief for the maintainer out of Norwich, but he did on occasion get down that way. So I asked him about the mystery signal. He said he knew it well and it was part of the signal inspection work that had to be done but he did not know why it was there. He had asked his supervisor

who also had no real answer, but the signal was active, inspected and maintained, probably until the last day of the O&W. Most likely it disappeared in the Summer of 1958 when the scrap train went through, but in any event all that was left in my day was the foundation and battery box and some cable.

Over the years since those balmy 1960's summer days, I have walked down to that magic spot many times, poked around the signal foundation and battery box and the ever diminishing remains of the hobo camp. After all these years, it is still a magnet and still a mystery as to why there was a signal here.

The signal was a single-arm US&S Style-B lower-quadrant automatic semaphore with a pointed blade to control the movement of northbound trains. O&W employee timetables, supplemental instructions and rules can help us define more about its function, so let's start there.

According to the 1916 Val Maps, it was originally Signal 239. Just why that might be since it was clearly located well north of MP 240 is yet another mystery. By 1922 Supplemental Instructions listed it as 2403. As per signal rules, automatic block signals were designated by a number, normally by a number plate, but in earlier years by a painted number on the case. The number would correspond to the nearest whole milepost, then to a tenth of a mile, with northbound signals ending in an odd number and southbound signals ending in even numbers. Automatic signals were controlled by track circuits that detected occupancy and were not under the control of a dispatcher or operator.

13. Automatic signals are numbered in accordance with their location to the mile posts — the last figure of the number indicating the decimal part of a mile. Southbound signals are designated by even decimal figures and northbound by odd decimal figures.

AUTOMATIC SEMAPHORE BLOCK SIGNAL NUMBERS

MAIN LINE

North-bound	South-bound	North-bound	South-bound	North-bound	South-bound
531	548	1091	1102	1619	1588
543	566	1109	1120	1633	1598
551	586	1129	1140	1649	1610
569	600	1149	1158	1665	1624
587	616	1165	1174	1679	1638
605	626	1181	1184	1869	1654
627	644	1189	1194	2235	1670
645	658	1201	1208	2247	1686
663	682	1217	1222	2403	1874
683	704	1235	1226	3137	2078
699	722	1249	1242	3141	2266
719	744	1265	1256	3151	3144
739	762	1281	1268	3165	3150
759	778	1293	1284	3177	3154
795	784	1313	1292	3189	3168
815	794	1331	1302	3199	3182
831	808	1347	1316	3211	3192
839	816	1363	1334	3217	3202
853	838	1381	1352	3221	3214
871	860	1403	1366	3231	3224
893	878	1415	1388		3236
905	894	1435	1406		3244
915	910	1455	1414		
925	924	1475	1428		
933	936	1495	1444		
949	950	1509	1464		
961	972	1525	1478		
975	990	1539	1498		
987	1000	1553	1510		
999	1026	1571	1520		
1011	1042	1589	1536		
1033	1056	1597	1550		
1051	1068	1599	1564		
1077	1088	1605	1578		

Signal 784 is a one arm signal with square end blade, indicating a positive block, and while stop is indicated can be passed only under flag protection.

AUTOMATIC EXPOSED DISC (BANNER) SIGNAL NUMBERS

MAIN LINE

Northbound	Southbound
1707	1802
1779	1846
2029	1934
2319	2036
2347	2346
2655	2362

AUTOMATIC SEMAPHORE BLOCK SIGNAL NUMBERS

UTICA DIVISION

Northbound	Southbound
U2751	U2754

AUTOMATIC EXPOSED DISC (BANNER) SIGNAL NUMBERS

UTICA DIVISION

Northbound
U2723

AUTOMATIC SEMAPHORE BLOCK SIGNAL NUMBERS

SCRANTON DIVISION

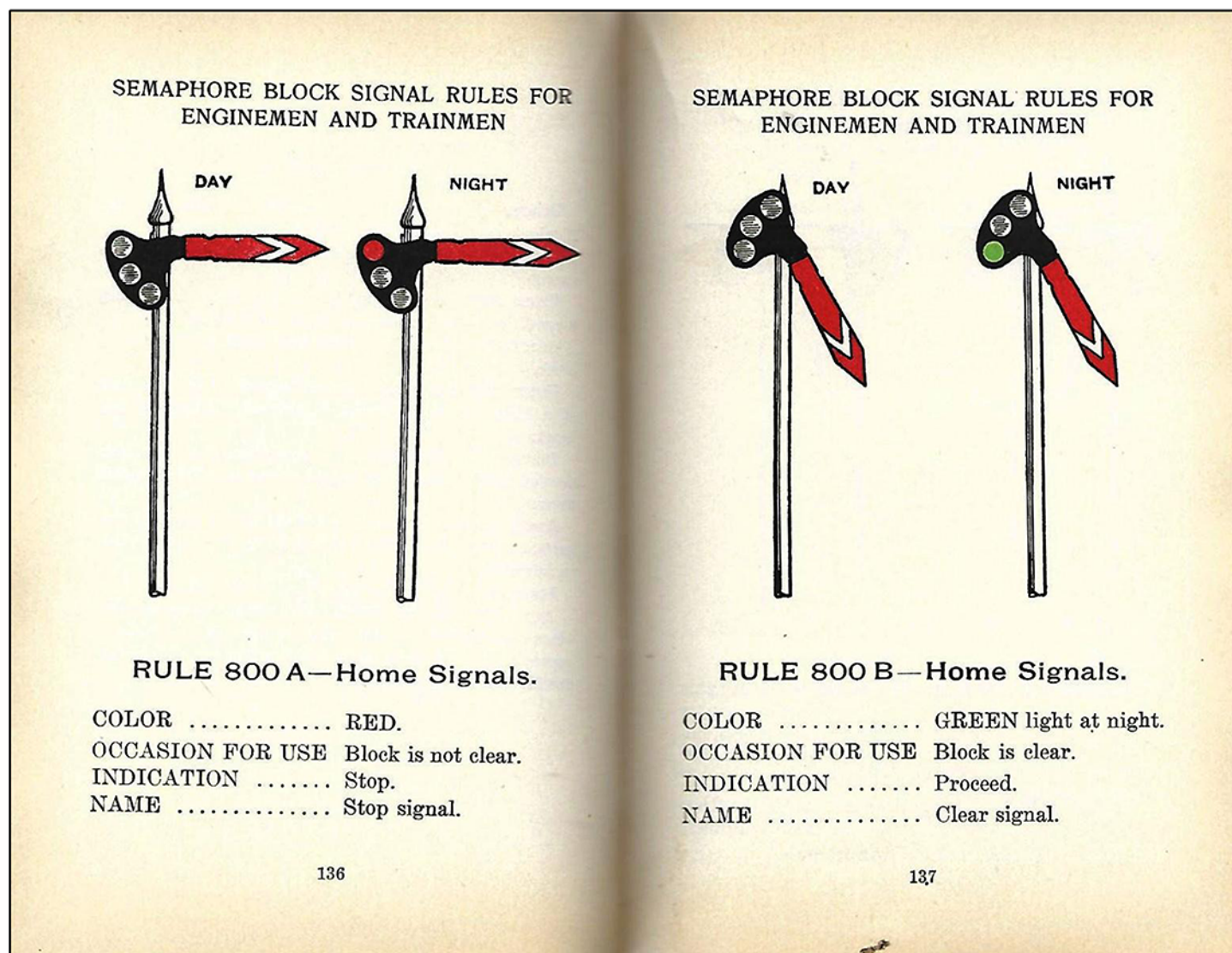
Northbound	Southbound
S2059	S1756
	S2044
	S2050

AUTOMATIC EXPOSED DISC (BANNER) SIGNAL NUMBERS

Northbound	Southbound
S1615	S1768
S1629	S1782
S1645	S1798
S1661	S1812
S1675	S1828
S1689	S1842
S1705	S1858
S1717	S1872
S1733	S1884
S1749	S1902
S1767	S1908
S1943	S1924
S1975	S1938
S2031	S1948
S2047	S1964
	S2008

Where automatic signals are in operation, crossover switches between the two main tracks are equipped with

From the March 15, 1913 edition of the O&W Rules of the Operating Department, we find that this semaphore would have been governed under Rules 800A and 800B Home Signals, and with the pointed blade end it would be a permissive signal, Stop and Proceed at Restricted Speed. Rule 804 reads: "Enginemen finding a home signal in stop position will bring their trains to a stop within an engine length of such signal, blow one long blast of the whistle, and proceed to the next signal at reduced speed, expecting to find track obstructed." Signal rules and definitions at that time identified this as an Automatic Block Home Signal, while an Absolute Stop Signal was covered under Interlocking Rules and those signals had square end blades. Indeed Rule 11B says: "An Automatic Block Signal is distinguished by the arm being pointed at the end and painted red." Our mystery signal appears to have three roundels for three aspects. However, by looking at the rulebook, it likely only has red and green.



NYO&W Rule 800 A&B, 1913 Rules of the Operating Department (Walter Kierzkowski Collection)

My best guess at this time is that it had something to do related to providing protection to trains operating within the Earlville yard limits. A 1946 photo taken in Earlville shows the turnout to the Conkling-Rogers coal shed having a circuit controller. Whether this was related to the semaphore circuit or the highway circuit cannot be verified without access to the signal and grade crossing schematics, but it does help provide clues. The 1916 Val Map covering the area north of the depot (see illustration on next page) shows an "End of Circuit" sign just north of the yard limit sign. It is believed that this sign was affiliated with the semaphore circuit to indicate where the end of the block was located. In order to be consistent with Rule 804, there would have to have been something indicating the end of the circuit as there was no "next signal"



A view from near MP 240.3 looking north towards the Consumers Dairy Turnout, West Main Street Crossing and the Earlville Depot in the early 1900's (O&W Archives)



The same view as seen in January 2010 about 100 years later (Doug Ellison)

But there is still the issue of the track segment within the defined circuit as being in established yard limits. Rule 93 of the rulebook reads: *"Within yard limits the main track may be used, protecting against first-class trains. Second-class and extra trains must move within yard limits prepared to stop unless the main track is seen or known to be clear."* Perhaps the best interpretation might be that, in order to facilitate the need for protection in a practical manner, in this situation an automatic block signal was installed.

So, then one may wonder why was the signal still there twenty years after the West Shore disappeared if that was a consideration. Good question, but the answer may have been in the fact that in order to discontinue use of a signal, application had to have been made to regulatory bodies such as the PSC in order to do that. Did the O&W just not deem that an issue important enough? Were there other issues or nuances involved with switching the milk station or other customers that necessitated this protection as we have speculated? Without something more definitive as to why and when this signal was installed and also kept in service, perhaps we will never know the true answer.

Photographer David Mainey was visiting the area in the late 1940's and wandered trackside to take a few photos. Recently these photos came to my attention and they are shared here. It was a dream come true to find not only a photo of an O&W diesel in Earlville, the only known one so far, but a photo of the mystery signal that was so elusive for so many years. For that we thank Mr. Mainey. Obviously, he was also drawn here, and with a camera, so all of us can see what was actually here.

So in conclusion, whatever the function of this signal, it was an isolated orphan up on the Northern Division, and a mystery even to the relief signal maintainer who inspected it in the last decade of O&W operation. We have done some interpretation and speculation, but it is still surrounded in some mystery and keeps its secrets well. If nothing else it was a magnet, or perhaps a beacon that drew several generations of Earlville youths, itinerant hobos, and even an out-of-state photographer to this remote but special spot along the O&W. May it be a reminder to us of what once was - the trains, the men who worked here and the innocent days of our youth.



NYO&W 35 switches out Consumer's Dairy, "in the hole" at Earlville, NY. This was a 1946 excursion and was likely part of regular Milk Train 10. Doug Ellison Collection



NYO&W FT #802 rolls south with an abbreviated consist circa 1948 - 1949 with what is probably Milk Train No. 10. To the right is the out of service order board, the agent now being located in Combine #125 at the southeast quadrant of the crossing. The depot was sold to the Earlville GLF on September 7, 1944 for \$800. The photographer is looking north up the siding with Moses Feed & Grain elevator in the distance with a box car spotted there. The tool house was this side of the box car and the platform can just be seen. Moses facility later burned to the ground, but the depot still exists. The mainline looks a little worse for wear and that is 90 lb. ARA-B rail through here, but the weed grown siding is of lower weight. As was typical of the Midland / O&W, the siding is the closest track to the depot. It appears by the vegetation to be well within mid-summer and a weed sprayer of some sort has made a trip through, but it is a narrow strip and a weak application. The New York Central's West Shore line from Syracuse was on the other side of the depot and the branch terminated just south of West Main Street crossing behind the photographer. Signal 240.3 is also behind the photographer and around several shallow curves out of sight. - David Mainey photo



Earlville Depot as it appeared on April 28, 1940
(Doug Ellison collection)



Earlville Depot as it appeared on July 4, 2021
(Doug Ellison)