

Early Master Mechanics On The Midland Part II - The "Minshull Dynasty" By Richard Palmer

The Minshull's were closely connected with the New York & Oswego Midland Railroad since its beginnings. First of the family here was Edward Minshull (Nov. 24, 1827 - Nov. 3, 1897) who later resided on North Street in Middletown. He was born in Glossop, Derbyshire, England, a son of John and Elizabeth (Bradshaw) Minshull. When he was 19 he married Maria McGurn in England.

They immigrated to Lowell, Massachusetts in 1854, then to Canada and remained there six years before moving back to the United States. As a machinist, Minshull worked for several railroads. These included those of the Erie in Susquehanna, and in Oswego for the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western and the Rome, Watertown & Ogdensburg. When the New York & Oswego Midland was established he went to work in their shops in Oswego. They had six boys, John E., Philip H., Thomas E., George B., James E., and Frank, and a daughter, Anna who married Bert Hasbrouck. Most of the boys became railroad men - a heritage they passed down to their sons.

Best known of these children was John, a natural born machinist like his father. He was born in England, and came to this country with his parents when he was about eight years of age. He did his apprenticeship at the Susquehanna shops of the Erie. There he learned his father's trade of machinist when only about fourteen years of age. For a few years he led an unsettled life, working at his trade and followed other pursuits. He worked in various places before moving back to live with his parents in Oswego. Here he was employed at Ames Iron Works, Kingsford Starch factory, finally finding his niche at the Midland Railroad shops where his father was a foreman. While in Oswego he became an active member of the Steamer Company No. 3 of the then Oswego Volunteer Fire Department.

He was employed in Oswego shops only briefly when he decided to familiarize himself with the railroad - first as a fireman then as engineer. He ran on the Northern Division, Delhi Branch, and later on the Middle Division between Norwich and Middletown. The last running he did on the road as engineer was on the express freight, carrying butter and cheese between Norwich and Middletown.

At the age of 25, Minshull, in 1874 was made foreman of the Middletown shops, filling that position satisfactorily for about a year. After the road was temporarily closed during the stormy winter of 1874-5, General Superintendent Henry M. Flint appointed him master mechanic for the entire railroad, a position he held until his untimely death in 1879. He replaced W. H. Angell. "The Midland repair shops at this place under the management of 'Jack ' Minshull, are turning out some good work," the Middletown Daily Evening Press noted on January 1, 1875.

Railroading was a dangerous business Minshull found out. On February 3, 1876 he and several other railroad officials were testing a new snowplow Minshull had invented, to clear the line of snow drifts ahead of the mail train. While on Bennett's Bridge 38 over the Willwemac River near Roscoe (then called Westfield Flats), the plow and engine unexpectedly derailed and crashed into the river, a fall of 28 feet. The bridge fell into the river. Minshall and several others on the plow received minor injuries. It was a frightful scene, the snowplow and engines and the timbers of the bridge being jammed and mashed together in the bed of the stream, according to one newspaper report. The mail train was flagged in time so as not to also go into the river. Flint was on the locomotive and was pinned next to the boiler head. He inhaled escaping steam and died from his injuries. Locomotive No. 55 was refurbished and named Henry M. Flint in his honor. Flint was replaced by John F. Mackie of Norwich. On April 1, 1876, the offices of general superintendent and master mechanic were moved from Middletown to the more central location of Norwich.

On June 13, 1877, John married Fannie E. Moore in Middletown. She was a teacher at Bennett Hill School there. The newlyweds left that day on their honeymoon trip that took them to Buffalo, Hamilton, Toronto, the Thousand Islands and Montreal. The Orange County Press on June 19, 1877 commented: We are advised that John Minshull of the Midland railroad has 'coupled up' with Miss Moore of Middletown with a trip through life. Miss Moore is an orphan, and we trust Jack will pull her through life's troubles, so that at the completion of the trip, himself and wife can congratulate themselves on a 'safe run.'" That "safe run" was cut short as a little more than two years later he was killed in a railroad accident at Trout Brook, near East Branch.

A Minshull invention was a small car propelled by steam used to inspect bridges. It was built in Middletown shops in 1877, had an upright boiler and a small cylinder with a nine-inch stroke and four-inch bore. It was capable of running about 30 to 40 miles per hour. On June 7, 1877 it was put to the test. Donning rain coats and boots and carrying overnight handbags. They left Middletown in the morning and traveled nearly 150 miles on this open car, inspecting bridges and trestles. After a long day they checked into the American Hotel in Norwich to spend the night. Next morning they continued on to Oswego.

Minshull apparently took a liking to the steam car experience and frequently used it on tours of inspection. Another such vehicle was built for this purpose and at the expense of C. W. Lanpher, superintendent of the Northern Division. Built at the Norwich shop, it was equipped with two pistons, a patent drive and air brakes, and had four chairs with spring seats. "It rides like a palace coach," the local newspaper noted. It was capable of running 40 miles per hour for many miles very efficiently. A third one was under construction at the time.

Philip Minshull, a machinist, and brother of John, was injured in Middletown on September 24, 1878 when the steam handcar he was on stopped too quickly. Also aboard were General Freight Agent R. W. Thatcher and his clerk, F. H. Getty. They crossed the "yard limits" of Middletown near the round house shortly before 10 a.m., disregarding the rule requiring trains to run slowly within the yard. The steam car was running at the rate of thirty or forty miles an hour when suddenly in the crooked cut near the Wickham Avenue depot they found they were about to rear-end the tender of engine 82, Ed McNiff being the engineer. That engine was backing slowly up towards the round house, having the right of way in the yard. They were about to collide before either could see each other. McNiff reversed his engine instantly and Minshull applied the steam brake. But it was too late. The engine halted but the steam car struck the engine tender with considerable force. Thatcher and Getty jumped off before this occurred and escaped comparatively unhurt. Minshull remained on the steam car. While applying the brakes the car collided with the engine tender and he was thrown forward. As a result he was cut around his eye. His right wrist was dislocated and his right leg was cut below the knee. The car was heavily damaged and the chairs in which they had been sitting were smashed. Getty and Thatcher managed to climb aboard Erie train No. 6 and returned back to New York.

One misfortune followed another on the Midland. At 6:20 a.m. on December 25, 1878 a fire broke out in the oil room of the Midland Railroad shops in Oswego. The blaze heavily damaged locomotives 6, 19, 24, 29, 44, 60, 62, 98, and 100. Nothing but the walls of the engine house were left standing. The shops were quickly rebuilt.

John always seemed to be in harm's way. On several occasions he had close calls. Another serious accident involving him occurred just three days later. Many miles of the Midland were blocked with snow and an engine and plow were despatched to clear the line to Oswego with him aboard. They got through to Oswego fine and started back to Norwich the following day. When a short distance north of Fulton at Battle Island, the plow derailed and turned over.

Minshull, who was riding on top of the plow, was thrown to the ground, but fortunately escaped with only a

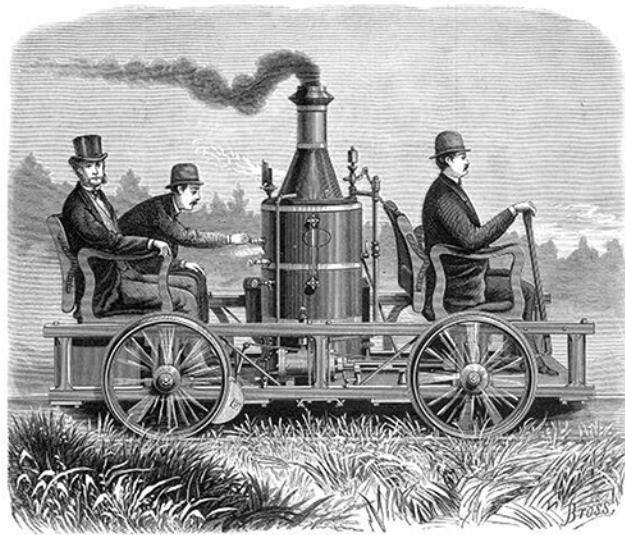
few bruises. The flagman was killed instantly and a brakeman suffered a broken leg. Minshull at the time was on top of the plow signaling directions to the engineer.

If that wasn't distressing enough, Minshull soon found himself in court in Delhi in February, 1879 on a legal matter. Andrew Bovee, a discharged locomotive engineer, had sued him for slander. Minshull had fired him for being "too lazy to attend to his duties properly." But after testimony of witnesses it was proved to the contrary, and the judge dismissed the case.

Minshull's last accident on August 13, 1879 at Trout Brook near East Branch proved fatal. He was on another inspection tour. While riding with others on a steam car, it appeared a collision with a team of horses and wagon at a crossing was imminent. He jumped off, striking his head as he rolled down the railroad embankment. The driver of the horses and wagon pulled out of the way just in time, avoiding a collision. But Minshull didn't realize this. The other officials remained aboard the car and escaped unhurt.

Minshull was picked up unconscious and taken to a nearby farm house where he remained for several days. For a brief period he regained consciousness but didn't realize what had happened. Meanwhile a telegram was sent to Middletown requesting medical assistance. Dr. Solomon Burke Pillsbury, a leading physician in Middletown, and Mrs. Minshull got aboard a special train, arriving at East Branch about two hours and 15 minutes later. The doctor determined Minshull had received a fractured skull.

To his young wife the blow of his sudden and violent death comes with most crushing force. She was with him at the end, having gone to his side a few hours after the accident. In her affliction she has the sincere sympathy of the whole community, the Middletown Daily Argus reported on August 19, 1879. At that time Minshull's immediate family consisted of his parents, three brothers and a sister. His remains were taken by train to Middletown for a largely attended funeral and burial.

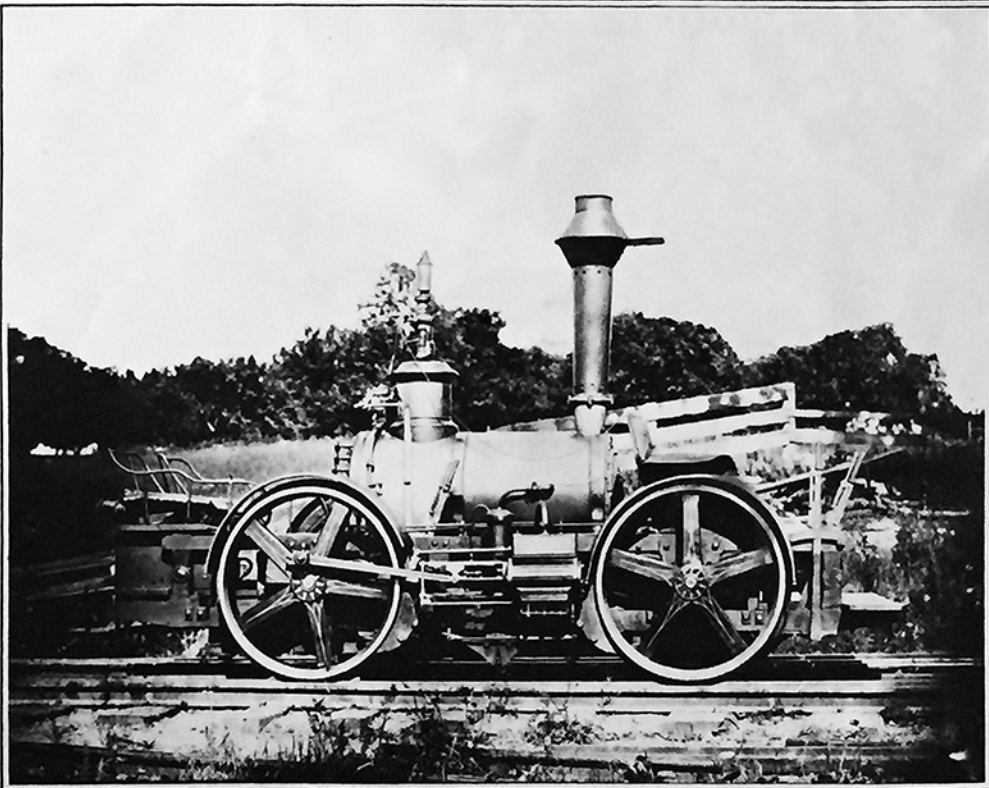


STEAM HAND CAR.

Steam hand car with upright boiler on the Midland undoubtedly looked much like this. It was designed and constructed by M. M. Buck & Co. of St. Louis in 1876. The boiler was intended to carry a pressure of 140 pounds, was three and a half feet in height with a diameter of 18 inches, placed in the center of the car. The cylinder was 3 1/2 by 6 inches. The body rested on rubber springs to allow it to ride well without lateral motion. Seats were in the front and rear. A barrel of water could take it 40 miles. There was a coal pan arranged in a space about two feet wide, sufficient to carry enough fuel for a day's run. It ran very efficiently up to 40 miles per hour, or seven miles in 15 minutes. Upright boilered engine for the Midland was built in Norwich shops. (From: Scientific American, August 5, 1876).

STEAM INSPECTION CAR No. 3

N. Y. & O. M. R. R.



GAUGE OF ROAD	4 FT 6 1/2 INS	STROKE OF CYLINDERS	8 1/2 INS	LENGTH OF TUBES	25 INS	SIZE OF STEAM PORTS	3/8 x 2 INS
WEIGHT IN RUNNING ORDER	7000 LBS	OUTSIDE DIA OF BOILER	2 1/2 INS	50 FT GRATE SURFACE	1.57	SIZE OF EXHAUST PORTS	1 1/2 x 2 INS
DIA OF WHEELS	33 INS	SIZE OF GRATE	16 3/4 x 13 1/2 INS	50 FT HEATING SURFACE IN FIRE BOX	9.13	DIA OF PUMP PLUNGER	1 1/8 INS
WHEEL BASE	5 FT 7 INS	NUMBER OF TUBES	65	50 FT HEATING SURFACE IN TUBES	44.32	STROKE OF PUMP PLUNGER	2 INS
DIA OF CYLINDERS	3 3/8 INS	DIA OF TUBES	1 1/2 INS	TOTAL SQ. FT HEATING SURFACE	53.45	CAPACITY OF TANK	122 GAL

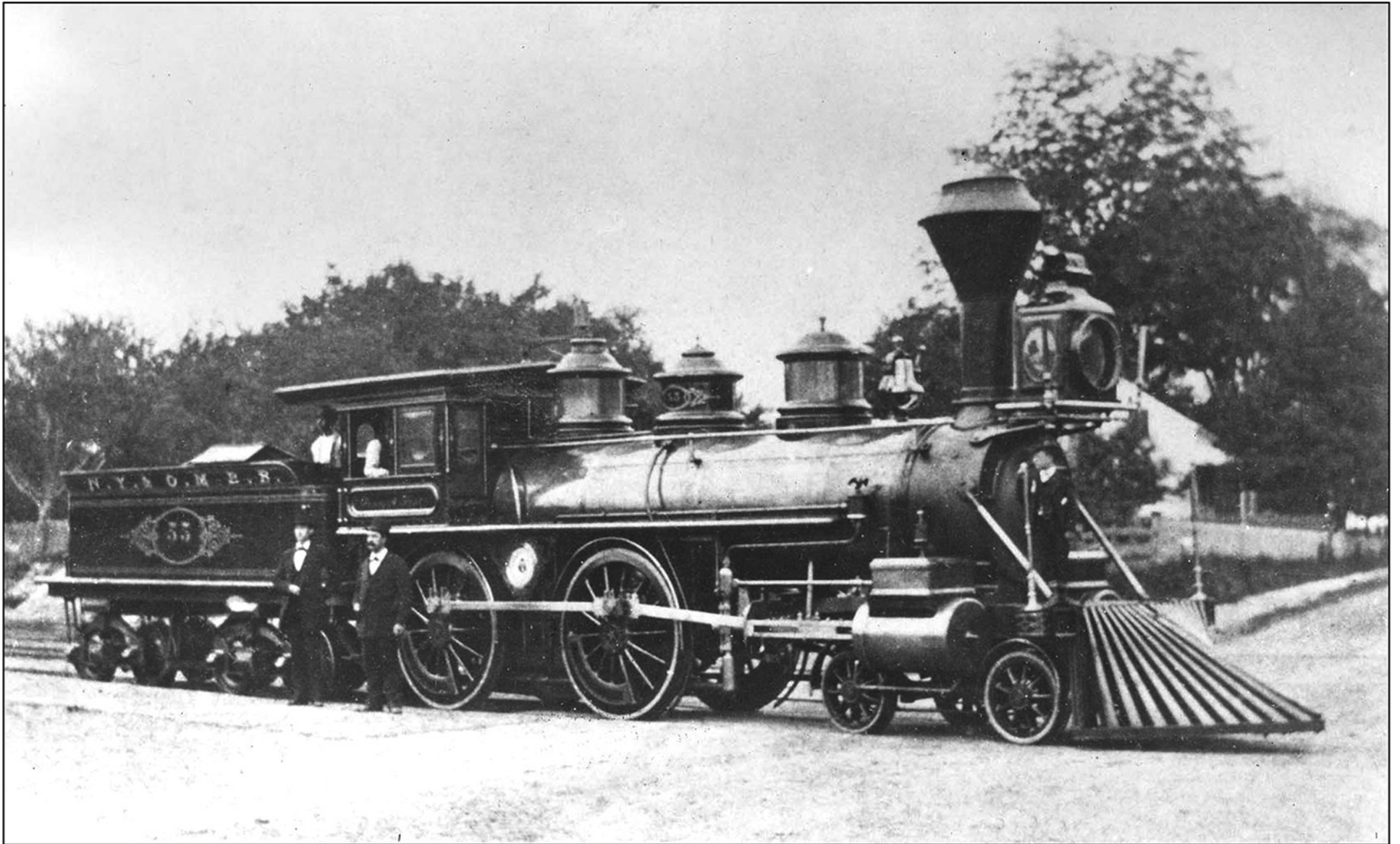
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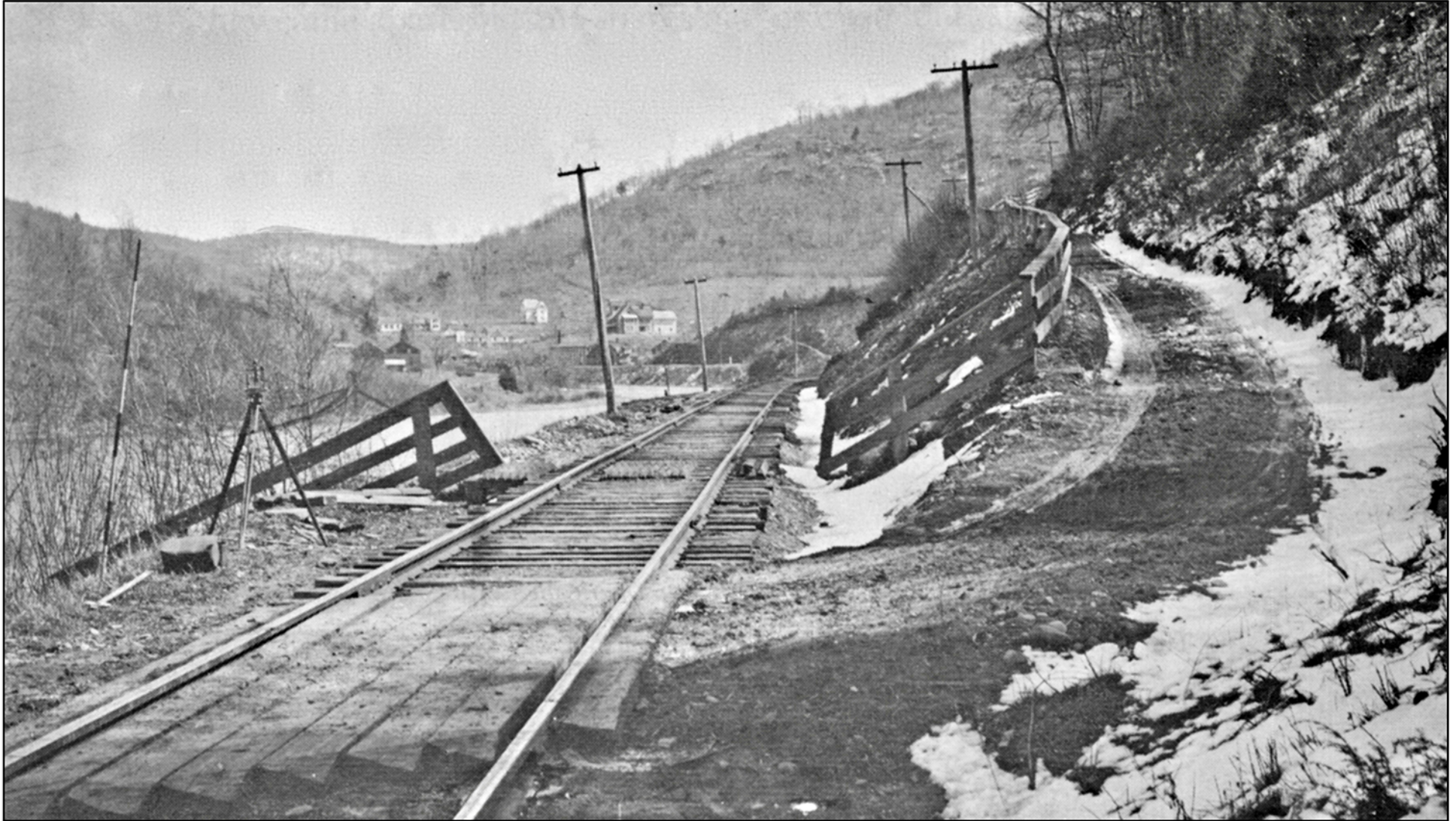


Gauge of Road	4 ft. 8 1/2 ins.	Stroke of Cylinders	8 1/2 ins.	Length of Tubes	25 ins.	Size of Steam Ports	3/8 x 2 ins.
Weight of Car in Running Order	7000 lbs.	Outside diam. of Boiler	2 1/2 ins.	Sq. ft. of Grate Surface	1.57	Size of Exhaust Ports	1 1/2 x 2 ins.
Diam. of Wheels	33 ins.	Size of Grate	16 3/4 x 13 1/2 ins.	Sq. ft. Heating Surface in Fire Box	9.13	Diam. of Pump Plunger	1 1/8 ins.
Wheel Base	5 ft. 7 ins.	Number of Tubes	65	Sq. ft. Heating Surface in Tubes	44.32	Stroke of Pump Plunger	2 ins.
Diam. of Cylinders	3 3/8 ins.	Diam. of Tubes	1 1/2 ins.	Total sq. ft. Heating Surface	53.45	Capacity of Tank	122 gals.

Views of New York & Oswego Midland Railroad Steam Inspection car No. 3 on which John Minshull is said to have been riding at the time of his death. Collection of Dan Myers.



the man in the top hat in this photo of the Midland's "Henry M. Flint" is likely John Minshull. He had the locomotive built in his buddy's memory for "Centennial Service" and is listed as being in the photo. The young man on the pilot is Flint's son who was the railroad's long-time paymaster. Contributed by Dan Myers. Can Myers Collection.



Accident that took the life of John Minshull occurred at this crossing near Trout Brook in 1879. Later, this crossing was realigned to make it much safer. Note the surveying equipment at left. Collection of Jeff Otto.

Edward Minshull MASTER MECHANIC.

John Minshull's signature appears on an accounting of "Locomotive Performance and Cost Per Mile" spread sheet for the Midland Road. Minshull managed a stable of 22 steam locomotives on the report which is dated May 1879. John Minshull was killed at Trout Brook (Peakville) just 3 months later."

John Minshull MASTER MECHANIC.

Master Mechanic Edward Minshull's signature appears on the September 1879 "Locomotive Performance" report. Minshull was appointed Master Mechanic upon the death of his son John in August of that year. Edward Minshull handed the job off to his son Phillip upon his retirement from the O&W".



PHILLIP MINSHULL

IN MEMORY OF

JOHN E. MUNSHILL

MASTER MECHANIC
OF THE N. Y. AND OSWEGO
MIDLAND R. R.

BORN SEPT. 19, 1849.

DIED AUG. 19, 1879.

ERECTED BY HIS FELLOW
OFFICERS AND LABORERS
AS AN EXPRESSION OF THEIR
REGARD FOR THE MANLINESS,
INTEGRITY AND GENEROSITY
OF HIS CHARACTER, AND OF
THEIR DEEP AFFECTION FOR
ONE WHOSE AIM IT WAS TO
KNOW AND DO THE RIGHT.

Monument in Hillside Cemetery, Middletown, to John E. Munshill. William F. Helmer collection.



The Minshull brothers John & Phillip are buried together in Middletown's Hillside Cemetery. Their father Edward is buried across town. All told the three Minshull's were the Master Mechanics for over 59 years! Contributed by Dan Myers. Dan Myers Collection.



Contributed by Dan Myers. Dan Myers Collection.