

Early Chief Engineers Of The Midland
Part I - Archibald C. Powell
By Richard Palmer



When it came to construction the board of directors of the New York & Oswego Midland Railroad left it to the chief engineer to get the job done. It was a tough job and only the best could do it. The Midland proved a challenge because it passed through some of the roughest country in New York State. But Archibald C. Powell of Syracuse proved equal to the job by doing much of the early engineering and surveying work.

By the mid 1860s he had long since proven himself a capable civil engineer. He was the Midland's first chief engineer and was equal to Midland President D.C. Littlejohn in making long-winded speeches promoting the railroad.

After graduating with a degree in engineering from Hobart College in Geneva, he worked on many canal and railroad projects. He left his mark on the Erie Canal. His name, as resident engineer, is carved in the builder's stone at Lock 28 of the Second Enlargement at Fort Hunter, in the Mohawk Valley. This was completed in 1841. Then, he became resident engineer for the Auburn & Rochester Railroad.

Powell was one of many professionals with impressive credentials hired to build and managed this railroad in its formative years. He was active in Syracuse business and politics. But he soon found it uncomfortable to remain with the Midland. He felt betrayed when the Syracuse Common Council rejected plans to allow the Midland to pass through the city, a plan which he had greatly supported, especially since in 1864 he was mayor. In 1867 he was an unsuccessful candidate for New York State Engineer and Surveyor. The Board of Directors accepted his resignation at a meeting in Oneida on February 6, 1868.

Besides owning and operating his own iron foundry business called A. C. Powell & Company on West Fayette street, Powell also continued to work on canal and railroad projects. After leaving the Midland he accepted a request from the Austrian government to act as consulting engineer on a proposal to make the Danube River navigable. He traveled with his family to Europe, remaining there for two years. Returning home, he was soon asked to survey the Syracuse Northern and West Shore railroads.

In community life, he was also Salt Superintendent, a job requiring management of the New York State salt lands on Onondaga Lake. He was a trustee at Onondaga County Savings Bank. He served two terms on the Onondaga County Board of Supervisors and was a member and vestryman of St. Paul's Episcopal Church.

Powell was born in Geneva July 25, 1813. He and his wife, the former Frances Gabriella Franchot, had four children and lived on the fashionable James Street area of Syracuse. He died on September 10, 1884 while on business in Quogue, Long Island. He is buried in Oakwood-Morningside Cemetery in Syracuse.



Builder's stone at the so-called "Yankee Hill Lock 28" at Fort Hunter. This a popular New York State historic site in the Mohawk Valley. New York State Canal Society.

Archibald C. Powel Photo - (Onondaga Historical Association).