



West Line Railroad

Many property owners on the northside of Hillside from the Newark City-line to Union have been puzzled by the irregular shapes of some of their house plots.

In some cases, the property lots are much deeper than the uniform 100 feet. In other instances the property line creates a triangular instead of rectangular lot. In still others, small landlocked pieces have been formed.

Deed searches show that these varied-shaped lots have been caused by the former right of way given more than 90 years ago to the Passaic Valley and Peapack Railroad Company, later called the New Jersey West Line Railroad Company.

The last remaining visual evidence of the railroad was removed recently when New Jersey Wholesale Drug Company building at 654 Glenwood Avenue was erected on the old railroad bed.

Until then, a passerby could observe the raised embankment over which the proposed rails were to have traveled through Hillside. The project was disbanded before tracks could be laid here.

The West Line, as it is generally known, was a small part of the gigantic race by the railroad barons to gain franchises from the coal mines of Pennsylvania to the tidewater of New Jersey at the port of New York.

Plans filed with the Secretary State of New Jersey May 7, 1870, showed that the railroad was to have originated in Newark, traveled a circuitous route through Waverly and Lyons Farms, Union, Springfield, Millburn, Short Hills, Summit, New Providence, Berkeley Heights, Gillette, Millington, Basking Ridge, Bernardsville to Peapack. A tentative route was to take the railroad through either Warren or Hunterdon Counties to the Delaware River between Frenchtown and Milford.

The Local Route

Locally also the railroad took a somewhat irregular route through the township. Following the gravel paths in today's Weequahic Park, Newark, the railroad was a short distance east of the Old Stone School House passing through the lands of J. Meeker and Amos Clark.

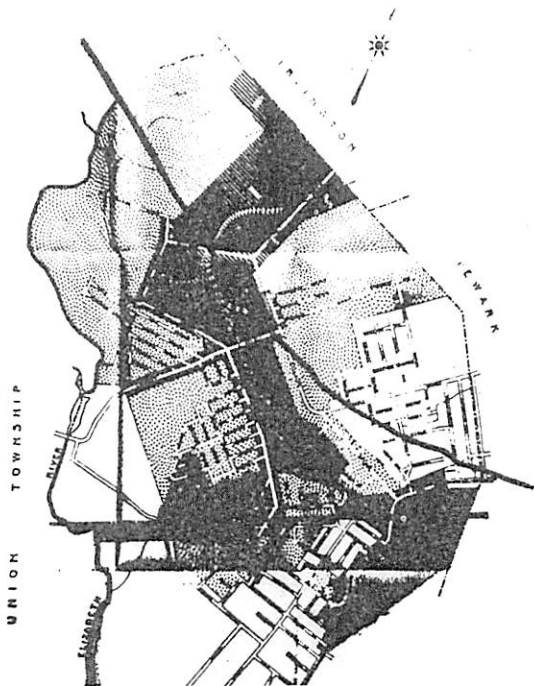
It crossed Elizabeth Avenue at the Keer Avenue entrance to the park and entered the township a short distance to the south. There it bisected property of James Williamson, the old blacksmith, and the estate of Charles Tillou, both along the southerly side of today's Williamson Avenue and easterly side of Munn Avenue.

Leaving the Tillou property, the road began to cut uphill crossing the property south of Clark Street of the three Bonds, Aaron, Elihu and James, the latter being near the old Fire House 2 in Maple Avenue.

There it crossed a small corner of a lot held by Martha Pruden and into property of James Jagers near today's Boa Place. Crossing Hillside Avenue above the Elks' Clubhouse, the line continued toward Florence Avenue into the land owned by John Winans and again entered property owned by Mr. Jagers in the area in Hillside Avenue near Buie Steel Corporation.

The proposed line continued through the present industrial area on the west side, cutting through lands of O. Woodruff, Moses Baker, John H. Terhune and Henry Baldwin near the Elizabeth River where it entered Union.

First public mention of the proposed project apparently was made in the "Newark Daily Advertiser," December 1, 1864, when it reported an application had been made to the State Legislature for the incorporation of a company.



Proposed Route of the West Line Railroad through Lyons Farms as superimposed on a 1922 map.

The bill to charter the railroad with a capital stock of \$1,200,000 and liberty to increase it to \$2,000,000 was introduced by February 9, 1865.

An additional provision stated that if the road were not completed within 10 years from July 1, 1865, the act of incorporation would be void. The legislature approved the charter March 29, 1865.

Nothing much more was written about the railroad except for some supplemental legislation until February 15, 1870, when the name was changed.

By September 6, 1870, two local residents, John and Hugh Rehill had been awarded the contract to grade between Millburn and Wavertly and the "New Jersey Journal" reported that the work was being pushed forward.

Timbers were cut on the property of Moses Baker for trestle work on the railroad. Most of the work however was in other portions of the line.

At Millburn more than a mile of trestle was erected 20 to 25 feet above the ground. Abutments for bridges were constructed near Brookside Avenue, Union.

Rails actually were laid and placed in operation from Summit to Bernardsville and trains were operated over them. These tracks later fell into the hands of the Lackawanna Railroad.

The Failure

Some of the difficulties which shortly beset the project were increased prices of land along the right of way, clashes in leadership of the company and a supplemental act of incorporation adopted by the State Legislature on April 9, 1868, which permitted overexpansion of bonded indebtedness.

The "New Jersey Journal" on December 28, 1870, reported that Mr. Jagers in a court hearing had gained payment of \$5,092 for a strip of land about a half mile west of the Old Stone School House in Lyons Farms instead of the \$1,200 offered by the Company.

Other property owners along the proposed route requested \$1,000 an acre for every pasture and meadow. The same paper on August 13, 1872, observed that a Mr. Ford gained \$5,500 on resale of an eleven acre parcel which he purchased from Henry Tillou for \$12,500.

The supplemental act permitted certain townships along the proposed railroad to create a bonded indebtedness and invest money in stock of the railroad. The act gave township commissioners all rights and privileges of other stockholders to elect directors of the company.

These commissioners exercised their rights in 1872 and took control of the company from Asa Packer, who also headed the Lehigh Valley Railroad. Mr. Packer had obtained control from the original incorporators a few years earlier to gain a route to the sea for the Lehigh Valley.

When the Lehigh was forced out of leadership, it demanded repayment of the \$300,000 it had lent to the West Line for construction of the line between Newark and Summit.

After considerable court wrangling, the West Line paid \$295,115.50 and received back its \$1,000,000 in company bonds from the Lehigh Valley Railroad. However during the year that Benjamin F. Beekman acted as president, no actual building was done.

Mr. Packer was returned to the office of president in June 10, 1873, but by that time the Lehigh had gained its present route to tidewater and the West Line was more than \$2,000,000 in debt with only \$1,000,000 assets.

The chancellor appointed a receiver on April 11, 1876, to sell the road. Bankruptcy proceedings were completed by 1878.

The failure of the West Line Railroad project may be considered an example of poor planning and over spending.