



The Mercer & Somerset Railroad

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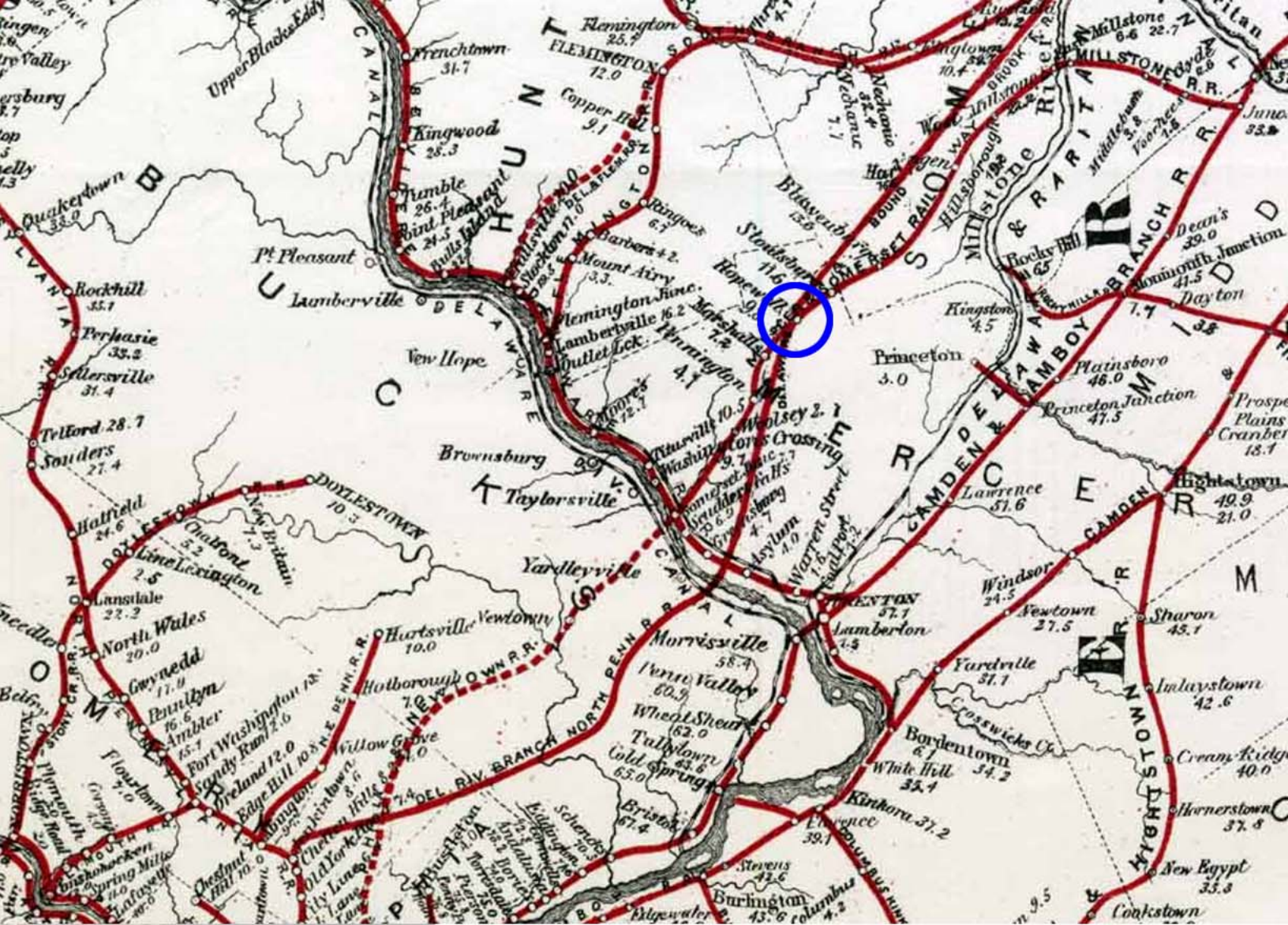
FROG WAR!

by John Kilbride

"It shall not be lawful at any time during the Charter to construct any other railroad in the state without the consent of the Companies, which shall be intended or used for the transportation of passengers or merchandise between the cities of New York and Philadelphia"

—Act of March 15, 1832, State of New Jersey

So set the stage for the event that would forever change the course of railroads in New Jersey some forty four-years later...



Included in the Charter creating the Camden & Amboy Railroad (the C&A), the clause protected their existence for the years that saw them build their original railroad line between Bordertown and South Amboy, later expanding south to Camden, westerly to Trenton, and another line up thru Princeton and New Brunswick. Such was the political might of the railroad with the legislators, that a monopoly was created. Later, the purchases of other rail lines enabled thru train service between Jersey City and Philadelphia and included improvements prompted by the Civil War which constructed the route now forming Amtrak's Northeast Corridor through New Jersey.

Following that war, and now an attractive property to the expanding Pennsylvania Railroad anxious to serve the metropolitan New York port, New Jersey was a prime target for other rail lines also anxious to reach harbor side. Realizing the northward construction of the rival Delaware & Bound Brook Railroad (the D&BB) along a flanking route, the C&A began construction of the Mercer & Somerset Railroad beginning in 1870. Four years later, the 25-mile line connected a point north of Trenton along the Delaware River with East Millstone. By that time, the PRR owned the C&A.

The threat of the rival D&BB building northward from Pennsylvania prompted the PRR to exert political pressure with Trenton. They were



The Frog that Caused all the Trouble. From a Photograph Taken Shortly After the Battle.

able to compromise by requiring that any/all intersecting rail lines must cross their line at 90 degrees. By now, the C&A founders were dead, the Charter expired, and the rail line now run by non-Jerseyans, factors which weaken their Trenton influence.

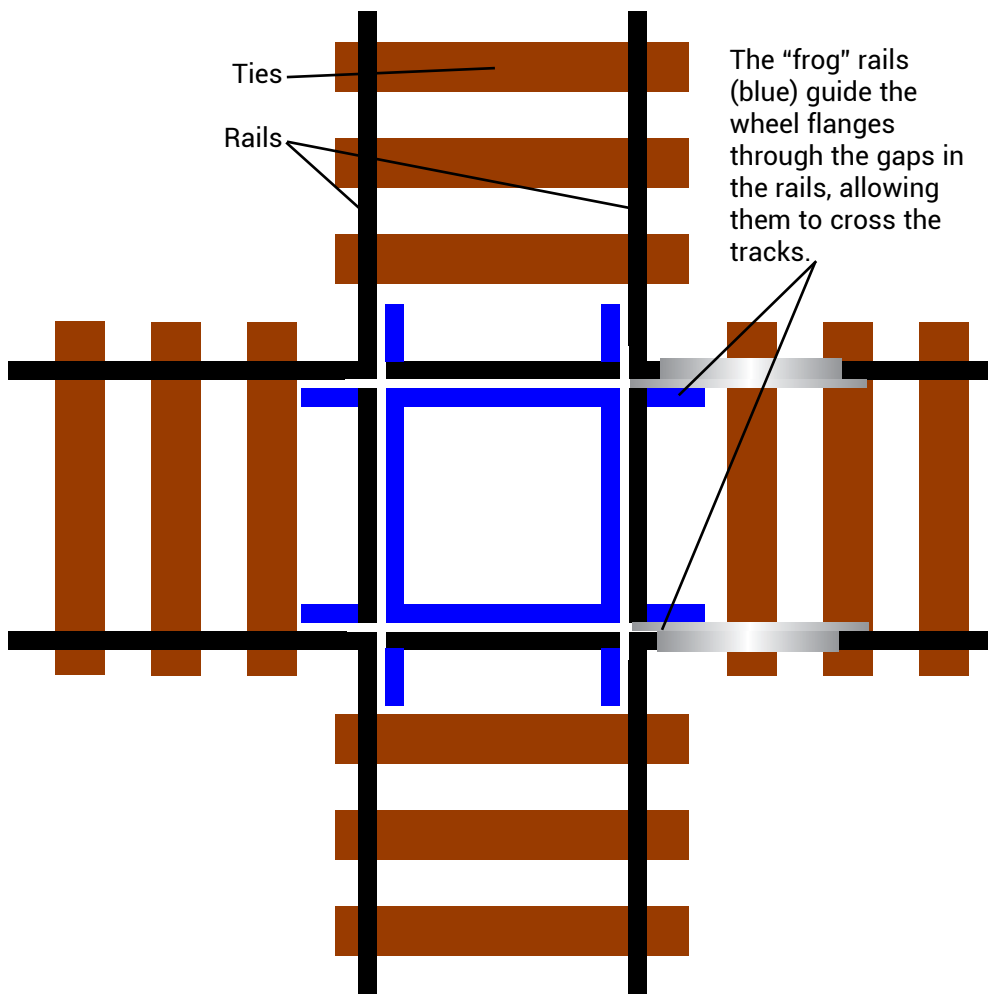
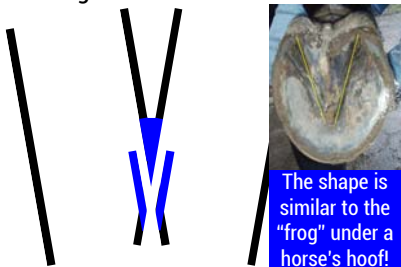
By winter's approach, construction of the D&BB reached closer to Hopewell. The following account will tell the story of the battle and a result that forever changed Garden State railroad construction. A large sign stands at the Hopewell station, with a description of the events leading up to and including the battle of the frog.

Within three years, the Mercer & Somerset was abandoned and later auctioned off. A few reminders remain if you know where to look, including three station structures and stone abutments scattered along the route, including one in the middle of the Millstone River.

And what is a "frog" in a railroad definition? A non-running rail placed alongside running rails, for the purpose of guiding a train's wheel flanges across intersecting tracks.

Why "Frog"?

The shape of such track crossings depends on the angles of the two tracks. The arrangements shown here are also known as "diamonds" because of the shape of the crossing. They are also used where one track splits into two at a switch, to guide the wheel flanges in the right direction (see diagram below). These are more of a V-shape, and may hint at the origins of the railroad jargon of "frog." There is a similarly V-shaped feature on the bottom of a horse's hoof, which is called a "frog." It acts as a sort of shock-absorber for the horse and its spring may account for the term. Another theory is that the diamond-shaped version looks like a splayed out frog.



What follows is an account of the "Frog War" that appeared in the *Sunday Times Advertiser* newspaper of April 30, 1916. The reporter interviewed an anonymous eyewitness to the 1876 event of forty years before.

The guard engine went onto the siding as she had done for three months before, when suddenly and silently an army of 200 stout employees of the B.B. rose from ambush nearby, rushed upon the guard engine, barricaded the tracks before and behind it with ties and other timbers, and proceeded to tie their captive with heavy chains to the tracks.

As one approaches (Marshall's Corner) from Trenton, he sees on the left, across a narrow valley, a long line of embankment, seamed by water erosion, in places tree shadowed, and on which, perhaps a herd of sleek cows is peacefully grazing. This is the old bed of the Mercer and Somerset Railroad, one of the historical roads of the country, famed for its "Battle of the Frogs" in which two great rival corporations locked horns and were only separated by the combined power of the courts and the state militia.

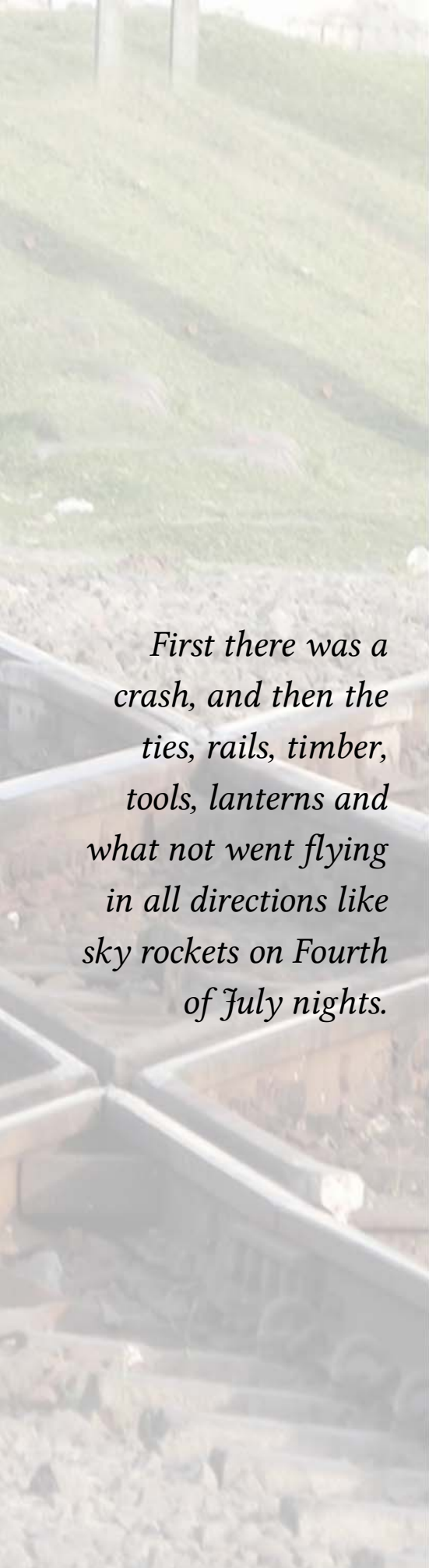
An old and intelligent resident of the neighborhood remembered the road and the battle perfectly and was willing to talk about it, although not wishing his name to appear.

"We had suffered so long from the tyranny of Camden and Amboy, and later the Pennsylvania systems," he said, "that when the Squire Knights of Trenton, with other local and Philadelphia capitalists, projected the Delaware and Bound Brook, we were with them heart and soul. The line was to run from Jenkintown, Pa. on the North Penn Railroad—which had a line into Philadelphia—to Bound Brook on the Jersey Central, which would give a direct line to New York and destroy the Pennsylvania's roundabout monopoly. The Pennsylvania was, of course, against them and the liveliest kind of fight developed. They didn't come to blows though, till the Bound Brook engineers laid out their crossing over the Pennsylvania's track, a short distance south of Hopewell village.

The first thing we knew, the Pennsy had its biggest engine—No. 679—I can see the figures on her now after 40 years, standing on its tracks just where the B.B. was to cross it, and it was evident to the veriest tyro [a most experienced person] that they meant to contest the crossing. But the B.B. men, under Squire Knight, were equal to the occasion. Three months ran along and the Bound Brook road was about ready to lay its rails across the rival road. The 'Pennsy' was a single track and every time a train came along, which wasn't often, the guarding engine [679] had to run off on a siding and let the regular go by, immediately after which it would resume its position.

Then came a bitter cold Wednesday night, January the fifth it was, at 7:30, when the regular train was due. The guard engine went onto the siding as she had done for three months before, when suddenly and silently an army of 200 stout employees of the B.B. rose from ambush nearby, rushed upon the guard engine, barricaded the tracks before and behind it with ties and other timbers, and proceeded to tie their captive with heavy chains to the tracks. Then they barricaded the main track above and below the crossing in a similar manner, tore up the rails and ties and proceeded to lay their heavy frogs for the crossing.

News of the incident was, of course, sent at once to Superintendent Jackson, of the Pennsylvania, at Jersey City and after he had blown off



First there was a crash, and then the ties, rails, timber, tools, lanterns and what not went flying in all directions like sky rockets on Fourth of July nights.

steam for a minute, as men will on such occasions, he wired Engineer George Ellis at Millstone, to get out [engine] No. 336 and put all steam and to ram their barricade at full speed and scatter it to the devil. I know, because Ellis later showed me the telegram, and No. 366 was one of the biggest engines. Ellis proved the man for the emergency. It's eleven miles from Millstone to Hopewell and he made it in fifteen minutes. We around the scene of operations—and a crowd of 500 had gathered by this time—heard the rumble down the valley towards Millstone that increased to a roar, and then a fiery thing, vomiting smoke and flame, dashed into view and made for the crossing. Not one of us thought she would take the barricade, and we made no effort to get away, but she did and at full speed. I never saw such a scene in my life. First there was a crash, and then the ties, rails, timber, tools, lanterns and what not went flying in all directions like sky rockets on Fourth of July nights.

[Note: Some accounts of the 'battle' mentioned that D&BB forces had placed leased CNJ engine No. 37 on the crossing as their own barricade, and that it took the brunt of the collision.]

The wonder is there wasn't a dozen killed, but nobody was hurt, at least so as to require attention, even Ellis escaped with some slight bruises. Engine No. 336, sinking into the soft earth, was put to rights in the repair shop in a day. Two other engines were sent down by the Pennsylvania people to hold the fort, but the Bound Brook officials were ready for them, and seized and held all three while an engine of their own was placed on the completed frog.

News of what was going on had spread meantime throughout the countryside, and by morning nearly fifteen hundred people had gathered, many of the armed, especially the farmers, with squirrel rifles, smooth bore muskets, and some with the old King's Arm flintlock of the revolution. Public feeling against the Pennsylvania was high, as I have said, and many threats were uttered against the officials thereof. Counsel of the Pennsylvania arrived from Newark on the 6th at 11 o'clock with an injunction restraining order from the Delaware and Bound Brook Railroad from meddling with the Pennsy's property until the Chancellor could hear and decide the case. This added fuel to the flames, and such was the tension that at 1 P.M., Sheriff Mount telegraphed Governor Bedle for troops. Four of the Trenton Companies A, B, D, and 6 were ordered under arms, (the alarm to rally being sounded by the City Hall bell), and one company from Lambertville—the whole under command of Colonel Angell of the Seventh Regiment.

The troops arrived on the scene soon after six the next morning, while it was still dark, and soon their campfires lit the skies while groups gathered around them and proceeded with the morning meal. The three locomotives, the armies of employees and spectators, formed a somber background. Armed guards were quickly placed around the scene of combat and the excitement to a great extent subsided. Then at one o'clock the same day, news came that the Chancellor had decided that the Delaware and Bound Brook ". . ." could cross the Pennsy line, and thus ". . ." ended the "Battle of the Frogs."

