Hopewell Junction, New York, like so many American towns, was a railroad town. Born during the nineteenth-century rail boom, it has survived, long after the rails themselves have been pulled up. While the rails are gone, the influence of the railroad is still present. In the case of Hopewell Junction, it’s in the form of the national register-listed preserved railroad depot and a significant community awareness of the history of the railroads and railroad workers who once built the town. This book is a deep dive into the railroads, and many of the railroaders, that served this small Hudson valley community and the larger area.

This short but detailed work begins by exploring the railroad history of Dutchess County, with a focus on the east-west lines. The county sits on the eastern shore of the Hudson River roughly seventy-five miles north of New York City and borders Connecticut on the east. The county seat and largest city in the county is Poughkeepsie, but Dutchess also contains the city of Beacon and many smaller villages and hamlets like Hopewell Junction, Amenia, Rhinebeck, Dover Plains, Wappinger Falls, and Hyde Park. The terrain is generally hilly and therefore not that conducive for railroad building. Vanderbilt’s New York Central was the first railroad in the county. Not surprisingly, it follows the banks of the Hudson on its way north from New York City to Albany and points west up the Mohawk River valley. The New York Central system had another north-south line (the Harlem line) that served the county on the eastern side. The Harlem line also begins in New York City but heads overland through West Plains, Brewster, Dover Plains, Amenia and Millerton before splitting to head for Albany and Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Both lines today see significant Metro North commuter traffic into New York City. Dutchess County was also served by a variety of east-west lines that sought to develop local traffic and to connect Hudson River ports to Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Boston. The ownership of these many early lines was as convoluted at the twisting routes they traversed over the hills of the county, but by the early twentieth century all were under
the control of the New York, New Haven, and Hartford railroad based in New Haven, Connecticut. With the 1889 completion of the Poughkeepsie high rail bridge over the Hudson, the east-west rail route through Hopewell Junction became a major through route for freight destined to and from southern New England.

After the railroad history of the county is explained in the first four chapters, the next five diverge from the established narrative and explore the community of Hopewell Junction and its changes from establishment to the present. Of special interest are chapters 7 and 8, both based on oral histories and unpublished diaries. They provide a wonderful glimpse at daily life in Hopewell Junction and at the railroads that connected the community to the wider world. So many enthusiast railroad histories focus on the artifacts and not the people who run the railroad. Thankfully this work focuses on the people. Bucolic Hopewell was not immune to larger forces within the railroad world. First, much of the through traffic to and from New England disappeared after the 1974 fire on the Poughkeepsie bridge over the Hudson. Second, with the bankruptcy of Penn Central in 1968 (the then owner of all the tracks in the county) and the formation of Conrail in 1976, the east-west rail routes were downgraded and eventually abandoned. After 1983, Hopewell Junction was no longer a rail junction. But the small depot remains in Hopewell, saved from demolition, and lovingly restored by local residents. It preserves many artifacts and tells the story of the community and the railroad that gave it life.

This book is a labor of love that was first conceived by Bernard L. Rudberg, local historian, genealogist, and longtime president of the Hopewell Junction Depot Preservation Committee. He compiled the history and wrote three smaller works on the railroads and community of Hopewell Junction. After Rudberg passed away, John M. Desmond, professor emeritus of English at Dutchess Community College, took these existing works and combined them, with added material, into this informative volume. While not a picture book, it is well illustrated with black-and-white photos and maps that enhance the text. An appendix of current-day depot photos, works cited list, and index complete the work. This book is unlikely to have broad historical interest beyond the region, but if you are interested in Dutchess County, New York, the railroad history of New York and New England, or even just a small Hudson valley community and its residents during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, you may be interested in this work.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-sci-med-tech


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