

48 Ely Railroad Depot

Main Street, Fairlee, Vermont



Ely Village and its remote train depot once played a vital role for the largest copper mining operation in the world. Historically, railroad depots along the Connecticut River were located in larger communities or in close proximity to bridges crossing the river from Vermont into New Hampshire. However, Ely Railroad Depot, at the junction of Routes 5 South and 244, defied conventional layout standards with the purpose to serve the nearby Vermont Copper Mining Company.

With the discovery of copper in Vershire, a mine was established by Henry Barnard in 1853. Twelve years later, Smith Ely assumed the role of company president, which led to the Village adopting his name in 1879. It is said that three-fifths of the world's copper output came from The Vermont Copper Mining Company and mines in Strafford and Corinth. In 1883, the copper market crashed, followed by intense labor strikers, closure of The Vermont Copper Mining Company, and destruction of the original Ely train depot by fire.

Around 1900 the Boston & Maine Railroad leased the property to build a new depot. While no documents specific to the Ely Depot exist to know for sure, rural railroad buildings built around the turn of the century were often designed by the railroad's own engineering staff. In addition, it was not uncommon for materials of an entire building to be pre-cut, pre-packed and transported to the construction site by railcar. In the case of the Ely Depot, the discovery of building components has indicated that the materials were marked "B & M RR, Ely, VT" on the back side, providing evidence that the Ely Depot was pre-fabricated to a degree.

Ely Depot design was unusual to Vermont due to its second floor apartment. Typically in Vermont, a single story depot without living quarters was located in towns and villages, and it was assumed the station agent/operator and his family would find housing close by. A second story apartment in a railroad depot building was common in rural areas in Maine and upstate and Western New York where distances between established towns was greater.

When the copper mine opened again due to higher demands at the turn of the century and twice more during World War I and World War II, the Ely Railroad Depot played a significant role in transporting raw materials for processing.

In addition to copper mining, as many as ten large youth summer camps cropped up along the shores of Lake Fairlee during the early 20th century, accommodating over 1,500 campers. The majority of the campers arrived and departed through the Ely Depot, and this trend continued until automobiles became the principal mode of travel in the 1960s. Lastly, the Ely Depot played a critical role in the local agricultural economy; large amounts of locally-grown hay were brought to the facility by wagon, loaded into railcars and transported to cities throughout the Northeast to feed horses used in urban delivery services. Milk and other dairy goods also travelled through the Ely Depot. And, most of the area's domestic and consumers goods arrived through the facility in Ely.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, Boston & Maine Railroad experienced serious financial problems and began to sell properties no longer thought to be critical to their daily operations. In 1959, the Ely Depot no longer appeared on any Boston & Maine schedules, and in 1961, the property was sold to a private entity, which used the building for storage. On January 4, 1965, the last passenger service rode the rails. A few years later, the building was quickly remodeled and the Post Office began a long term tenancy.

The Ely Depot was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1994.

Sources:

"Ely Boston & Maine Railroad Depot." *Historical Places Database*. HP DB. Web. Accessed 3 May 2013.

<<http://www.hpdb.org/51305>>

National Register of Historic Places. Ely Boston & Maine Railroad Depot. Town of Fairlee. Orange County. Vermont.

Reference # 94001448 <http://www.crjc.org/heritage/V14->

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