



# *Tales of Amherst*

A Look Back

Daniel Lombardo

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Amherst, Massachusetts

1986

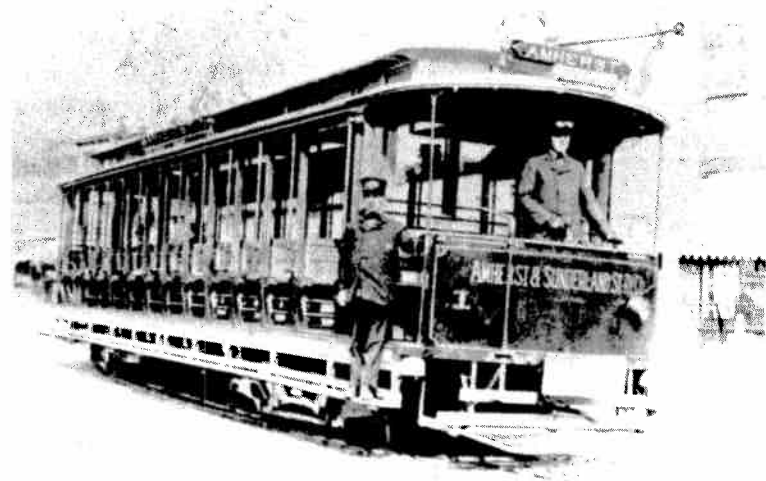
## The Trolley Years

AT 4:00 P.M. ON JUNE 16, 1897, AMHERST MADE A LEAP forward into the age of the trolley. After years of anticipation, red tape, excitement, and dissent, passengers boarded the first trolley at the Amherst House on Amherst Common and traveled to North Amherst. Trolley company officers, stockholders, reporters, and businessmen filled the seats and held onto the sides. They arrived in North Amherst to the sound of the church bell ringing and the shouts of men and women who waved their hats and handkerchiefs.

Many houses along the route were decorated with flags, and before the return trip the trolleys themselves were similarly trimmed. The newspapers reported that "A hand-organ and its owner were captured and put on the second car and passengers had music all the way on the down trip."

Trolleys originated in the 1830s as horse drawn carriages on rails. The first electric trolleys were used in the 1880s, the first in Massachusetts coming to Lynn in 1887. The word "trolley" came from the use of overhead electric wires, which had small carriages or "trollers" being pulled along them.

In 1895 Amherst had spurned the efforts of the Northampton Street Railway Company to extend its lines to Amherst. Amherst's businessmen opposed making it easy for Amherst customers to shop in Northampton. Instead, the people of Amherst and Sunderland formed a company and initially had track built from North Amherst down North Pleasant Street to the Boston and Maine Railroad Station on South Pleasant Street. A spur took passengers down Main Street to the New London Northern Railroad Depot. Construction had begun in April, 1897, with tracks being laid by 75 Italian workers. A 25' x 40' wooden powerhouse, powered by steam, was built on land leased from the D. Graves & Company Mill in North Amherst.



*Abbe Duval, left, and F. F. Guyott, on the Amherst and Sunderland Trolley.*

When a time schedule was issued at the end of July, 27 trips ran daily, with 26 on Sunday, running from 6:15 A.M. to 10:15 P.M. Rides cost a nickel, and ice cream and other refreshments were available at a pavilion in North Amherst. The trolley company maintained Riverside Park in North Amherst to induce people to use the trolley. Occasional power outages caused problems, resulting in at least one group of disgruntled passengers having to walk back to the center of Amherst after a July day at Riverside Park.

In October, 1897, the line was extended to East Amherst, but the greatest change came in 1900. After a bitter rivalry between the Amherst and Sunderland Railway, and the Northampton Railway, a link was finally made connecting Amherst and Northampton. The ride took 45 minutes and included a crossing of the Connecticut River bridge in large wagons. In 1901, the Amherst line reached Sunderland, and the next year it was extended south to Granby. In its peak year, 1903, the line added track to West Pelham.

On March 31, 1905, the Northampton and Amherst Street Railway merged with the Greenfield, the Deerfield and Northampton, and the Greenfield and Turners Falls Street Railways. In 1907 the Amherst and Sunderland Railway was bought out by the Holyoke Street Railway.

and thus the tri-county area was linked by an extensive network of trolleys.

Despite major and minor accidents—from floods, to the Amherst woman who was frightened by lightning and sprained her ankle jumping from the trolley—the trolley systems were for the most part successful. Still Amherst businesses persistently complained of competition from other towns within easy reach of customers. From that time onward, merchants no longer had captive customers. The advent of automobiles and buses increased the ease of travel, forcing merchants to adjust to outside competition and making trolleys obsolete by the mid-1930s.

## Hi Henry's Minstrel Troupe

BY THE TIME HI HENRY'S MINSTREL TROUPE PLAYED AMHERST in April, 1886, minstrel shows had become somewhat less primitive, while still holding to some of their early traditions. Notwithstanding the, to our minds, objectionable blackface numbers, Amherst filled College Hall for two highly popular performances and the *Amherst Record* showered Hi Henry with accolades.

The interest in imitating black speech and song can be traced to Englishman Charles Mathews who, after a visit to the U.S. in 1822, used Southern plantation songs and stories in his British shows. American minstrel shows swept this country in the 1820s and remained the most popular form of entertainment for over fifty years. The syncopated, lively music of the shows helped spawn ragtime, blues, early jazz, burlesque, and vaudeville. The most important early company was the Christy Minstrels, which played on Broadway for nearly ten years and had songs written for it by Stephen Foster.

Hi Henry's Minstrels began their Amherst performances with a number from the early days of minstrel shows. At center stage was the "interlocutor" in whiteface and formal attire. On either side were men in blackface, gaudy swallowtailed coats, and striped pants, including Mr. Bones (playing castanets) and Mr. Tambo (playing tambourine). Competition from musical comedies, drama, and opera had diminished the emphasis on portraying blacks as happy slaves and dandies, but blackface was still popular into the 20th century.

The rest of the Amherst performances consisted of musical numbers, violin and cornet solos, the Irish comedians Morton and Coleman, clog dancing, and a farce. The *Amherst Record* hailed the "freedom from all objectionable features," admiring "the man who rattled the bones" and encouraging a full house for a following performance.



*College Hall, where minstrel shows were performed, corner of Northampton Road and South Pleasant Street.  
(John L. Lovell photo)*

Hi Henry, who was the uncle of Amherst's tinner and plumber, N. H. Lee, was called by the paper "a gentleman of wealth and refinement." Henry traveled in his own elegant railroad car costing over \$12,000. It had staterooms for members of the troupe, a private room and office, a kitchen, and a dining room. There were 22 performers and musicians in the troupe, two carmen, and a cook who was "a genuine Frenchman and can understand scarcely a word of English."

Though minstrel shows had passed their heyday, Amherst showed rare enthusiasm for Hi Henry's shows of April 6 and 13, before seeing them off to Greenfield for their next performance.

## Christmas Shopping on the

Amherst Common, 1886

THE AMHERST CHRISTMAS SEASON OF 1886 FOUND THE shelves of the local merchants filled with an unusual variety of merchandise specially displayed for the holidays. Christmas shopping around the Common could provide all that was needed under the tree and on the table for a traditional 19th century Christmas.

In Merchants Row on South Pleasant Street, Jackson and Cutler filled the middle of the store with fancy goods. These included jewel cases, dressing cases, sachet bags, albums from 25 cents to \$4.50, Christmas cards at 5 cents, and children's tea sets and toys from one cent to several dollars.

Nearby at E. R. Bennett's one could buy elegant gold and silver watches, gold thimbles, and opera glasses. Bennett, "a good open-hearted fellow," said his music boxes produced music that would "answer every purpose of a genuine Jenny Lind and house organ."

Also in Merchants Row was J. A. Rawson, watchmaker and jeweller. His stock was said to be the most valuable in town, and the shop was full of customers day and evening. Besides gold, silver, and jewels, Rawson also carried dolls—either "complete in every essential" or "those incomplete, minus heads, and appendages." His blackboards were ideal to "represent the explorations of Africa with the Congo . . . and long-tailed savages."

Before one left Merchants Row, a stop at F. H. Howes's store could fill the pantry with groceries or supply the table with fancy crockery from England or France. His selection of fine lamps was said to "give light enough to illumine the night in Africa and other places equally dark; in the hands of the police they might throw light on the congress-



*Carriages, coaches, and wagons on the west side of the Amherst Common, 1880s.*  
(John L. Lovell photo)

men in Washington and close observers could, perhaps, discover an honest man out of politics."

On North Pleasant Street the Grange Store provided pure and fresh Kibbe's candies, plus nuts, Persian dates, new figs at 20 cents a pound, tea, and Stickney & Poors's spices.

Around the corner on Phoenix Row, Main Street, Henry Adams's apothecary shop stocked confectionaries, bonbonnières, cornucopias, and fancy boxes for Christmas. His neighbor was bookseller M. N. Spear, who advertised gift books, toys, statuary, Bibles, and novelties for Christmas. At Chester Kellogg's boot shop on Phoenix Row, the claim was that a pair of his slippers would "improve the health, benefit the morals, sharpen the intellect and improve the appetite for Christmas dinner."

A typical Amherst Christmas dinner of 1886 featured a fat turkey which could be bought from John Mullen. Mullen's meat market was in Palmer's Block, now the site of Town Hall. For those who "ain't fond of turkey," Mullen had "all kinds of meats, provisions and game . . . at reasonable prices."