



# Guiding Trains Across the Water Level Route

*Adapted from a Program by William Moll*

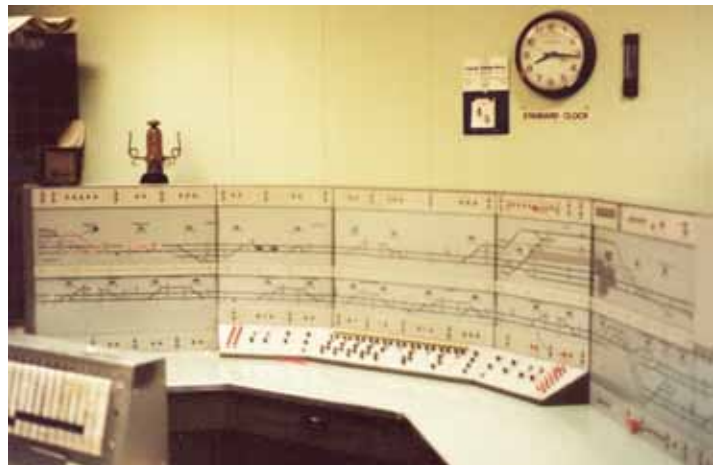
Key, Lock & Lantern members who attended the 2016 convention enjoyed a banquet dinner at the Trackside Restaurant in Utica Union Station, which included several excellent presentations on local railroad history. As noted in Bill Moll's program about the Utica area, the station was once the headquarters of the Conrail Mohawk-Hudson Division, with the dispatchers office located right across the hall from the restaurant where the KL&L dinner was held. The following article and photos are adapted from Bill's presentation, with additional information from employee timetables & bulletins.

On May 24, 1914, the New York Central Railroad's magnificent new station in Utica, NY opened for business, providing comfortable accommodations for passengers who were making the connection between the Water Level Route mainline and trains on the St. Lawrence and Adirondack divisions. The following year, both the Lackawanna and New York, Ontario & Western railroads relocated to the building, making it a true "union station." At the time, the offices and dispatchers of the Adirondack Division were housed in the impressive structure, the architecture of which was inspired by New York's Grand Central Terminal.

However, by the late 1950's passenger service had begun to decline, and the New York Central was examining ways to cut costs through the reduction of facilities. The next decade saw many of the large stations across New York State shuttered and replaced with much smaller buildings. The Adirondack Division had already been folded into the St. Lawrence Division, with its offices moved to Watertown, and the passenger and express departments at Utica Union Station were rapidly shrinking. Fortunately, the New York Central's consolidation plans happened to work in Utica's favor.



Conrail train dispatcher Bob Hand works the "Utica Dispatcher" position in 1984. The former New York Central Traffic Master System (shown below) gives him direct control of switches and signals between Kirkville, east of Syracuse, and Selkirk Yard. Collection of Bill Moll.



On October 26, 1958, the Mohawk Division and St. Lawrence-Adirondack Division were combined, with headquarters established at Utica. The administrative and dispatching offices at Albany and Watertown were closed and relocated to the new facilities in Utica Union Station. At the time, dispatching was performed solely by using telephones and train sheets, with telegraph operators on the St. Lawrence delivering train orders, and towermen lining switches and signals on the Mohawk. However, it wasn't long before modern new equipment was introduced to the division.

In mid-1961, a General Railway Signal "Traffic Master System" centralized traffic control panel was installed in the



Utica Chief Train Dispatcher Bill Proni oversees train operations on the entire Conrail Mohawk-Hudson Division in this 1984 photo from the collection of Bill Moll.

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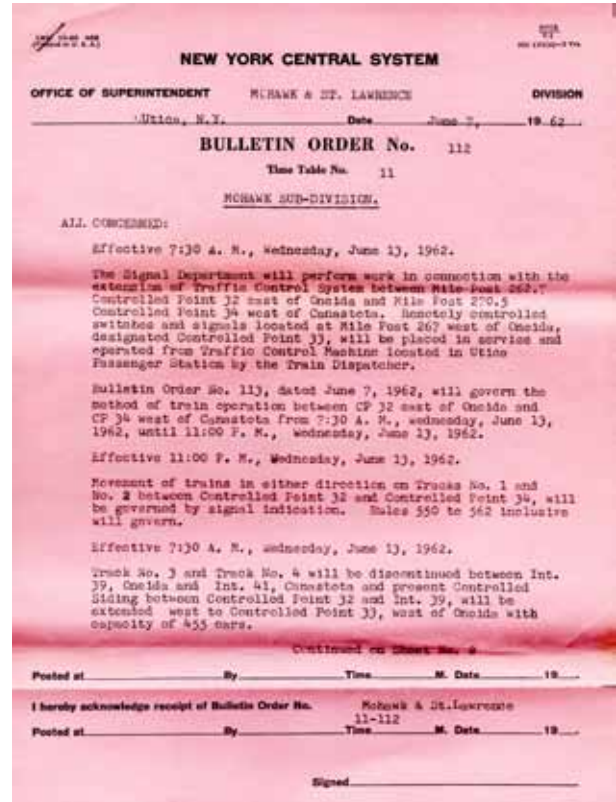
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Mohawk Division dispatcher's office. During 1961, 1962 and 1963, manned towers (known as signal stations on the Central) across the division were gradually phased out and replaced with interlocking plants that were remotely operated by the dispatcher under Traffic Control System (TCS) rules. When the project was complete, the Utica dispatcher had direct control of the entire Mohawk Division mainline from Kirkville to Schenectady, along with the West Shore Branch from the connection at Hoffmans to Selkirk Yard.

Throughout this period, the St. Lawrence Division dispatcher continued to utilize the old method of dispatching trains by issuing train orders and receiving "OS" reports from



The St. Lawrence Desk, which controlled the "dark" territory from Syracuse to Montreal, was given charge of the Hudson Line from Albany to Poughkeepsie in 1983. Dispatcher Mark Gravelin lines up an Amtrak train on the board in this 1984 photo from the collection of Bill Moll.



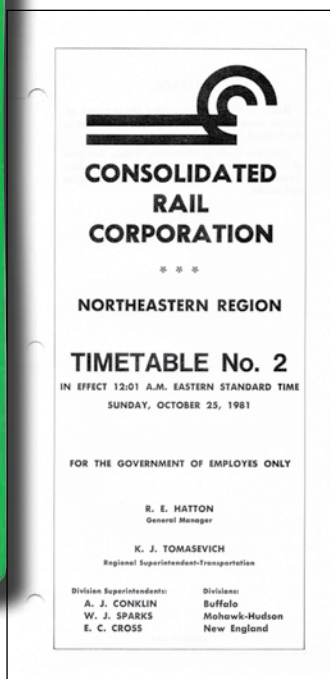
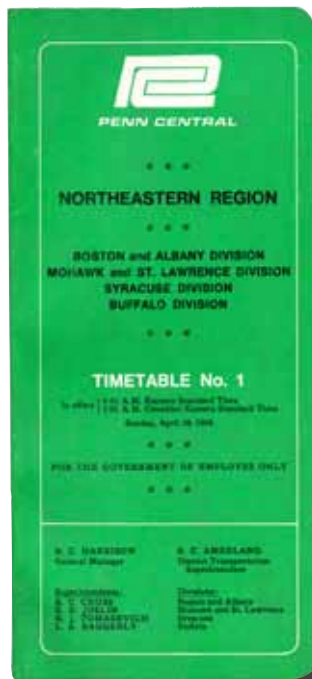
A 1962 New York Central bulletin order phasing in the new Traffic Control System rules. Collection of Bill Moll.

stations along the line. However, once passenger service was discontinued in 1964, many agent/operator positions were abolished or reduced to part time hours, leaving only a handful of open offices for the delivery of orders.

When Penn Central took over in 1968, a divisional realignment saw most of the territory west of Syracuse transferred from the Syracuse Division to the Buffalo Division, and the Mohawk & St. Lawrence Division in turn absorbed by the Syracuse Division. Despite this change, the dispatchers remained in Utica, with the added responsibility of directing operations in Syracuse through an operator at "GS" tower in the city. This tower had remained open after the signal replacement project, due to the busy nature of the terminal.

In late 1970, Penn Central began phasing out the stations on the Massena Branch of the former St. Lawrence Division, with the duties of the operators at Pulaski and Philadelphia transferred to the position at Massey Yard in Watertown. At the same time, the Syracuse Division began to be commonly referred to as the Mohawk Division, and was officially renamed the Mohawk-Hudson Division on March 15, 1971, with headquarters at Utica.

On April 1, 1976, Conrail took over the lines of the bankrupt Penn Central Transportation Company, assuming the divisional operating structure that had previously been in place. The new company continued to eliminate stations on the Massena Branch, incorporating the PRR-style "Block Limit Station" rules by early 1980, with operators at Massey and Massena directing all train movements under the authority of the St. Lawrence dispatcher in Utica. Later that year, the operator



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position at Massey was abolished, with all work transferred to Massena. Although Conrail began to consolidate operations and eliminate overlapping territory from its component railroads, most operations on the Mohawk-Hudson Division were initially very similar to those of Penn Central days.

However, significant changes came to the St. Lawrence Desk in 1983. The operator position at Massena was eliminated, with the dispatcher assuming direct control of trains on what was now designated the Montreal Secondary track. Also that year, Conrail was relieved of the responsibility of operating commuter trains, with much of its trackage in the New York and Philadelphia areas transferred to local transportation authorities.



Former "GS" Tower operator Steve Beagle moved from Syracuse along with his TCS machine in 1984, to the new position of "Utica Operator." Collection of Bill Moll.

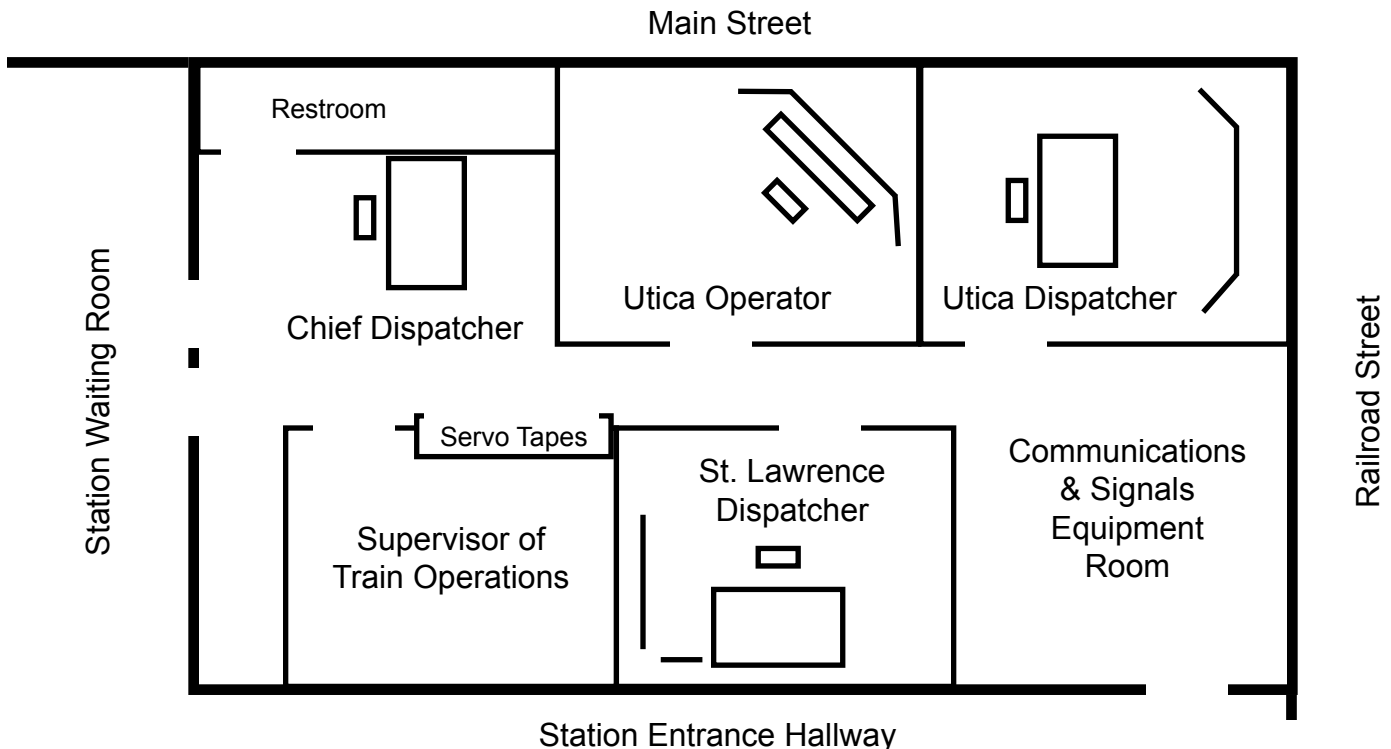


This 1984 view of Tom Rider at the Utica Dispatcher desk shows the general layout of the office. The Utica Operator is visible through the window behind the dispatcher, with the Chief Dispatcher located beyond another window in the next room. Photo & diagram below courtesy of Bill Moll.

Most of the former Metropolitan Region went to Metro North Commuter Railroad, with the exception of the mainline between Poughkeepsie and Albany. This stretch, which had been renamed the Hudson Line, became part of the Mohawk-Hudson Division. During the summer of 1983, control of this territory was handed over to the St. Lawrence Dispatcher, with the duties of that position suddenly including both "dark territory" and a high-speed mainline governed by TCS Rules.

Another addition to the Utica office took place in July of 1984. "GS" tower in Syracuse was closed, and the TCS panel which had been used to control five interlocking plants in the city was relocated to the dispatcher's office. In this case, the tower operator position was retained, and the newly renamed "Utica Operator" simply moved to Union Station along with his machine. However, even bigger changes were looming on the horizon.

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In 1985, Conrail placed a new Computer Assisted Train Dispatching (CATD) system in service in the Buffalo Division office. With this system, large wall-mounted computer display screens replaced model boards, and dispatchers operated switches and signals with a touch screen. Once the bugs were worked out, the railroad began making plans to install CATD equipment in regional dispatching centers, which would replace the existing offices across the system.

On June 28, 1987, the Mohawk-Hudson Division and the New England Division were combined to form the Albany Division, with headquarters at Selkirk Yard. In October, the Springfield, MA and Utica dispatching offices were closed, with control of train movements transferred to a new CATD facility in the Albany Division office. After 30 years of being the hub of operations for the region, the dispatcher desks and control machines in the Utica office silently gathered dust.

With the Mohawk-Hudson Division offices gone, Utica Union Station faced an uncertain future. A 1979 project had partially restored the building for passengers changing between Amtrak's Empire Service and Adirondack Railway trains to the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid. However, the ongoing viability of the building had been contingent on its offices being occupied by Conrail. At trackside, the platforms had deteriorated

and were littered with debris from abandoned baggage elevators and other facilities.

Fortunately, the repair and restoration efforts continued, with building owner Oneida County moving offices into the space vacated by Conrail, and additional renovations made to the waiting room and platforms. The Utica & Mohawk Valley chapter of the NRHS acquired the dispatching machines and moved them

to the adjacent Children's Museum for eventual restoration and display. The former dispatchers office in the southwest corner of the station now houses the Department of Motor Vehicles, with clerks renewing drivers licenses in the exact spot where railroaders once guided the "Great Steel Fleet" along the Mohawk. Perhaps a bit of irony, but the one thing that has always been certain in the railroad industry is change.



Photo by Nick Kubit

Computer Assisted Train Dispatching (CATD) provides dispatchers with visual displays of train movements (background) for safer, more efficient train operations.

*A circa-1988 publicity photo shows the new Albany Division dispatching office, which replaced the Mohawk-Hudson Division office in Utica. In the background, former St. Lawrence Division dispatcher Paul Dickson handles train movements on the "Mohawk Desk" on the left, while former D&H dispatcher Rick Ketterer works the "Hudson Desk" on the right. The "St. Lawrence Desk" is out of the photo to the left. In the foreground, Supervisor of Train Operations Tom Rider (standing) discusses plans with Assistant Chief Dispatchers Bob Saladino (left) and Bud Bartier (right). Conrail photo.*



*Above, Bill Proni worked the Mohawk Chief position until retirement from CSX in 2006. At right, Bill Moll dispatches trains using the Conrail CATD system.*

