

## Henry Vanness: Conductor on the Rockville Line By Jean Luddy

Every community has people who manage to lead successful lives in spite of obstacles imposed on them by life or society. Henry Vanness worked for the railroad for forty-three years, starting as a freight handler and rising to the rank of Passenger Conductor in 1880, a position that he held until his retirement in 1907. Vanness' employment record demonstrated his motivation and determination. These achievements are especially remarkable, because he had to overcome the prejudicial attitudes facing African Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Vanness' achievement as the only "colored"



conductor on the Hartford, Providence & Fishkill Railroad was recognized by the citizens of Rockville. He was featured in several newspaper articles during his career. When he passed away in 1926, his death made the front page of the *Rockville Journal* and a number of prominent local citizens attended his funeral.

"Henry Vanness was born in Lenox, Mass. December 14, 1841 and moved to Rockville in 1855. For a time he worked on a farm in Tolland and later was teamster and drove a large truck with two fine horses and won many friends by his courtesy. The Rockville branch Railroad was incorporated in 1857, authorizing a railroad from a point on the Hartford Providence & Fishkill Railroad in the town of Vernon to Rockville. In 1863, the name of the road was changed to Rockville Railroad Company and opened for traffic on August 10, 1863. On September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1864, when the Rockville Railroad had only been in operation for a year, he entered the employ of the Company as a freight handler and continued in that capacity until 1866, when he was placed in charge of the switching crew at Rockville. In 1868 he was promoted to Baggage-master and in February 1880 to Passenger Conductor in which capacity he served until May 4, 1907 when he retired on pension. Forty-three years of service, with an absolute clear record on his retirement." (RJ 5/27/1926)

When Vanness was promoted to Conductor in 1880, a surprise reception in his honor was held in Rockville. Local businessmen and citizens assembled to present Vanness with a badge and lantern as tokens of their esteem. J. C. Hammond gave the following speech:

"It is no doubt somewhat of a surprise to you to be thus ushered before such an august body as is here assembled, but a glance about you will be sufficient to assure you that you are among friends. It has fallen to my lot, and thus is imposed upon me the pleasant duty of explaining the object of this gathering. It has for a long time been the desire of the patrons of the railroad - your friends - to present to you some suitable token of their regard and esteem. We remember some twenty years ago when you as a mere boy and (before the days of railroads in Rockville), as Captain of one of Father Corey's

four-in-hand schooners [large horse-drawn wagons], sailing from this port to Hartford or Vernon Depot as cargoes were obtainable; later, and after the building of the Branch, as laborer in the freight house; still later a brakeman and baggage master. Now we know you as Conductor. In all these positions you have been polite, faithful and honest. And the motto which the token, *Semper Paratus*, is particularly applicable in your case, for you have at all times and in all places been *ever ready* to attend to the wants of the patrons of the road, be they rich or poor, and above all every ready with civil answers to civil questions, never getting above your business nor allowing your business to get above you. As one who has had part in procuring these gifts, it gives me pleasure to state that all have given cheerfully and many who names do not appear on the list, would have been only too glad to have contributed, had an opportunity been offered them. It is not a local offering; in fact the project was set on foot outside this village, and you will find the names of donors living along the entire line to Hartford. It is the wish of your friends that you wear this badge, knowing as they do, that were you loaded down with badges and jewels, you would still be the same; ever polite, ever faithful, every honest, ever accommodating, ever ready Henry Vanness.” (RJ 7/2/1880)

A description of the badge followed: “In gold and enamel, the design is a ribbon border, enclosing a miniature lantern; on the border appears the letters N.Y. & N.E.R.R. Conductor and at the sides *Semper Paratus*, all in blue and black enamel. The lantern has a red enamel globe in the center of which is a small diamond for a light; the design being to represent the faithful conductor who never fails to have the proper signal ready in case of an emergency by day or night.” (RJ 7/2/1880)



*Conductor Henry Vanness and train crew stand with an engine in the Rockville train yard*

Henry Vanness and his wife, Mary A. Porter, were married in 1870. They owned a house in Rockville on Spruce Street which runs along Fox Hill. Mrs. Vanness’ brother, Charles Ethan Porter, the artist, lived in the house next door. Both houses exist today.

In 1890 a local reporter calling himself the “Son of Rest” wrote a series of columns about local people and events. In January he paid a visit to the Vanness family:

“The S.O.R made Mr. and Mrs. Henry Vanness a pleasant call Tuesday evening and was well repaid for his climb up Fox Hill. The electric lights shone in all their glory and a brilliant sight the city presented. It more than pays one to ascend Fox Hill at night when the electric lights are burning, and see this beautiful picture. When I stepped upon the piazza of Mr. Vanness’ cozy residence I had a choice treat in the musical line. On entering the sitting room, I witnessed a happy scene. At the piano sat the popular artist, Charles E. Porter, and about the room sat Mrs. Vanness and her two daughters, Mr. and Mrs. Wm. H. Porter, Mrs. R. A. Jeffery of Meriden, and others. All seemed to be enjoying the good old Methodist camp meeting hymns so much loved by everybody, especially the aged Mr. and Mrs. Porter, who are enthusiastic camp meeting goers. I left pleasantly impressed with the family of Mr. Vanness, the most popular railroad conductor in New England.” (RJ 1/16/1890)

In 1892, the Rockville Journal reported an incident that occurred on a train where a “drummer” or traveling salesman made a racist comment about Conductor Vanness.

“Everybody knows how popular Conductor Vanness is, especially with Rockville people, and Thursday, when a fresh drummer wearing a yachting cap, made a derogatory remark, on account of the color of Mr. Vanness, as that gentleman passed through the train, he immediately found himself in hot water.

W. Frank Fay, overhearing the remark, bristled with indignation, and turning to the drummer, said, “Sir, I guess you don’t know the gentleman you are taking about. This whole county is at his back, and no one can have his place, as long as he wishes to retain it.”

The drummer essayed to speak, but Mr. Fay continued, shaking his forefinger, “I would advise you not to repeat your remark in the hearing of its subject, for he is something of a scrapper.”

“Well, I am quite a scrapper myself,” said the drummer, becoming aroused, “and there isn’t a man on the train can lick me.”

“Well, I don’t know about that.” said Mr. Fay, feeling affectionately of his biceps, and smiling knowingly as he half rose from his seat.

For a moment it looked as if there was going to be war, but the drummer, evidently ashamed of himself, had to good sense to keep quiet and matters settled down. But the drummer had nothing more to say about the color line” (RJ 6/30/1892)

Henry Vanness retired in 1907. He continued to reside in his home on Spruce Street after his wife passed away in 1918. At the end of 1925, he moved to Meriden to live with a niece. He returned frequently to Rockville where he would visit with friends at the train station. Several days after a visit in May of 1926, he died suddenly. Both his death and funeral service were covered by the Rockville Journal.

“He retired with the regard, respect and good wishes of his associates and supervising officials and at the time of his death was one of Rockville’s highly respected citizens. He was a member of the Rockville Methodist church, also an honorary member of the Men’s Union of the Union Congregational Church. Mr. Vanness cherished among his most precious possessions the many letters of appreciation he received from railroad officials at the time of his retirement.” (RJ 5/27/1926)

“The funeral of Henry Vanness, former conductor on the Rockville-Vernon line was held Friday afternoon...and a good number visited the room during the morning and early afternoon and paid their respects to Mr. Vanness’s memory. Mr. Vanness was said to be the only colored man who has ever served as a railroad conductor in the United

States and he was loved by Rockville people because of his fine Christian character and his unfailing courtesy.” (RJ 6/3/1926)

Officials from the railroad company and the Railroad Veterans Association joined local civic and business leaders as Henry Vanness was laid to rest in Grove Hill cemetery.

Henry Vanness earned respect as dedicated railroad employee in spite of the limitations imposed by society. As a man of color in a position of authority, he walked a fine line. Not only was Vanness an exemplary employee, but he was recognized as a person of status in his home town. The study of local history often uncovers local heroes who need to be remembered beyond their own time. Henry Vanness is one such man whose life demonstrated the ability to succeed beyond social prejudices.