

## Kalamazoo, a Railroad Town

The area that is now Kalamazoo was along an important trade route inhabited by Native American tribes, particularly the Potawatomi, who lived along the Kalamazoo River and used its waterways for trade and transportation. The area began attracting European-American settlers in the 1820s. A small village originally called Bronson after the first permanent non-native settler. It was renamed Kalamazoo in 1836, adopting the name of the river flowing through town. With the arrival of the railroads in 1846, Kalamazoo quickly grew into a regional hub for trade and manufacturing. By the late 1800s, it had earned national recognition for industries such as paper production, farming, and pharmaceuticals, laying the foundation for the city's continued growth and development. In 1950, it ranked as Michigan's eighth-largest city, with a population of 57,400 trailing only Detroit, Grand Rapids, Flint, Dearborn, Saginaw, Lansing, and Pontiac.



*The Michigan Central depot as seen in 1920, was built in 1886. Today it still hosts rail-traveling passengers on Amtrak as well as a city bus terminal. NYCSHS PB629137*

To say Kalamazoo wasn't a railroad town would be an understatement. Although it did not host a major division point or had extensive back shops, the city once had ten steam lines and two electric interurban lines radiating outward, along with a network of electric streetcars operating within the city itself.

The New York Central, through its Michigan Central subsidiary, was by far the dominant railroad in Kalamazoo. The city sat at milepost 135.8 on the vital Detroit–Chicago main line, a key artery in the NYC system. Many of the NYC's premier New York–Chicago passenger trains traveled through Canada from Buffalo, reentering the United States at Windsor/Detroit before passing through Kalamazoo enroute to Chicago.

Besides the Michigan Central mainline, NYC's operation in the city included the north–south Kalamazoo Branch which extended 36 miles south to White Pigeon, where it connected with the NYC's Old Road Branch between Toledo and Elkhart, and 59 miles north to Grand Rapids. This line was originally a Lake Shore & Michigan Southern property but transferred to Michigan Central management in the 19-teens. The Michigan Central/NYC also had the 40-mile South Haven Branch which diverged from the Michigan

Central main just west of the Kalamazoo depot and ran west to its namesake port city on Lake Michigan. In addition, subsidiary Chicago, Kalamazoo & Saginaw Railway extended from Kalamazoo northwest 45 miles to Woodbury. By 1943 it was cut back to 23 miles from Kalamazoo to Richland and Hooper.



*Chicago, Kalamazoo & Saginaw #20 is seen switching in Kalamazoo. A class B-10n 0-6-0, originally MCRR 8779 a Alco product from 1912, it was assigned to the CK&S in 1929, it was retired in 1945. NYCSHS PC528131*

Pennsylvania Railroad's north-south Grand Rapids & Indiana line diverged from the PRR Pittsburgh to Chicago main line at Fort Wayne, Indiana. It ran 93 miles to Kalamazoo before continuing north to Grand Rapids and ultimately reaching Mackinaw City at the tip of Michigan's lower peninsula.

The smallest player in Kalamazoo's post-World War II railroad scene was the Grand Trunk Western. Who acquired their 11 mile Pavilion to Kalamazoo branch from the Chicago Kalamazoo & Saginaw. At Pavilion, the branch met GTW's Port Huron-to-Chicago main line.

Finally, the Kalamazoo, Lake Shore & Chicago was a 50-mile independent route known as the "Fruit Belt Line", Operating from Kalamazoo west to South Haven on Lake Michigan, it connected with steamship service. The line was taken over by the Pere Marquette Railroad in 1923, which subsequently abandoned the 17-mile segment between Kalamazoo and Lawton in 1924.

Electric interurbans and streetcars also made Kalamazoo their home. Interurban lines connected the city with Grand Rapids and Battle Creek, while ten local streetcar routes radiated outward from the downtown center, providing extensive urban transit service in the pre private automobile era.

New York Central's 1943 *List of Officers and Representatives, Stations and Other Facilities* indicates that the railroad maintained three yards in Kalamazoo. Botsford Yard, located on the Michigan Central main line on the city's east side, had a capacity of 375 cars. South Yard, serving the north-south Grand Rapids Branch, could handle 150 cars, while the Chicago, Kalamazoo & Saginaw yard had space for 80 cars. The roundhouse at Botsford Yard contained 21 stalls—ten measuring 92 feet, nine at 97 feet, and three at 114 feet. In addition, a second engine house for the Chicago, Kalamazoo & Saginaw provided six 78-foot stalls.

In 1945, sixteen New York Central passenger trains operated daily over the former Michigan Central main between Detroit and Chicago. Eight originated or terminated beyond Detroit at New York, Boston, or Toronto. Pullman service through Kalamazoo also connected Chicago with Buffalo, Albany, Saginaw, and Bay City. Named trains calling at Kalamazoo included the Motor City Special, Wolverine, New England Wolverine, Twilight Limited, North Shore Limited, New York Special, Niagara Canadian, Valley Express, Mercury, and Western Express.



*J-1d #5284 pulls train #139 the no passengers Railway Express on the outskirts of Kalamazoo in May 1951. Scheduled to leave New York 30<sup>th</sup> Street yard at 11:20pm, it would be in Rochester at 7:20am. Then travel via the Falls Road Branch, crossing into Canada at Niagara Falls and scheduled to be in Detroit at 1:45pm, then arriving at Chicago's Englewood Yard at 6:45pm. A little more than 19 hours New York to Chicago run. NYCSHS PC512135*

In addition, the Pennsylvania Railroad ran two trains daily in each direction between its mainline connection at Fort Wayne, Indiana, and Grand Rapids/Mackinaw City, further adding to Kalamazoo's importance as a passenger rail hub.

In 1958, New York Central rerouted all overhead freight traffic between Detroit and Chicago onto the upgraded Michigan Air Line, running from Jackson to Three Rivers, then south along the Kalamazoo Branch to White Pigeon, and onward via the Old Road Branch to the expanded Robert R. Young Yard in Elkhart, Indiana. There, traffic from the Lake Shore route was combined with Michigan Central shipments and sorted for direct westward connections to Chicago. Passenger trains between Detroit and Chicago continued to run along the Michigan Central main line through Kalamazoo. The only NYC freight trains serving Kalamazoo were those operating on the Kalamazoo Branch between Grand Rapids and Elkhart, or trains composed of cars from local industries and interchanges along the Michigan Central main line between Jackson and Porter, Indiana.

The 1968 merger with the Pennsylvania Railroad brought few immediate changes. Freight traffic between Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids was shifted to the more direct PRR route, though the NYC line remained in service to serve local industries. The South Haven Branch, however, was discontinued in 1973.



*Amtrak 32 a General Electric P42DC leads train #352 past Botsford Yard on Kalamazoo's east side on July 30, 2017. Today the eight Amtrak trains are powered by Siemens SC-44 Locomotives and Siemens Venture coaches. SA Lakin Photo*

The creation of Conrail in 1976 reshaped rail operations in Kalamazoo. The Michigan Central main line west of Kalamazoo to Porter, Indiana, was transferred to Amtrak, though Conrail continued to provide local freight service west of Kalamazoo from Niles and later Burns Harbor, Indiana. Meanwhile, the NYC line between Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids, the remaining portion of the Chicago Kalamazoo and Saginaw outside of Kalamazoo's city limits, and the Grand Rapids & Indiana (PRR) line between Kalamazoo and Kendallville, Indiana, were all abandoned.

In 1999, Norfolk Southern assumed control of the Conrail lines in the Kalamazoo area. In 2009, the Elkhart to Grand Rapids Branch—which now is made up of the NYC line south of Kalamazoo, the PRR line north of Kalamazoo, as well as Botsford Yard—was leased to the newly formed Grand Elk Railroad, a WATCO subsidiary. While the Grand Truck Western was merged into parent Canadian National.

Norfolk Southern sold the Michigan Central main line east of Kalamazoo to the state of Michigan in 2012. NS continues to serve freight customers east of Kalamazoo along the line from Jackson and Battle Creek and the Amtrak portion west of Kalamazoo from Burns Harbor, Indiana.

Today, Amtrak runs three daily trains each way between Detroit and Chicago on the former Michigan Central mainline east of Poter, Indiana. These trains continue north to Pontiac from Detroit via former GTW tracks. Another Amtrak daily roundtrip runs between Port Huron and Chicago that uses Grand Trunk Western (CN) tracks east of Battle Creek. Much of the former Michigan Central main line has been upgraded to allow speeds of up to 110 mph.