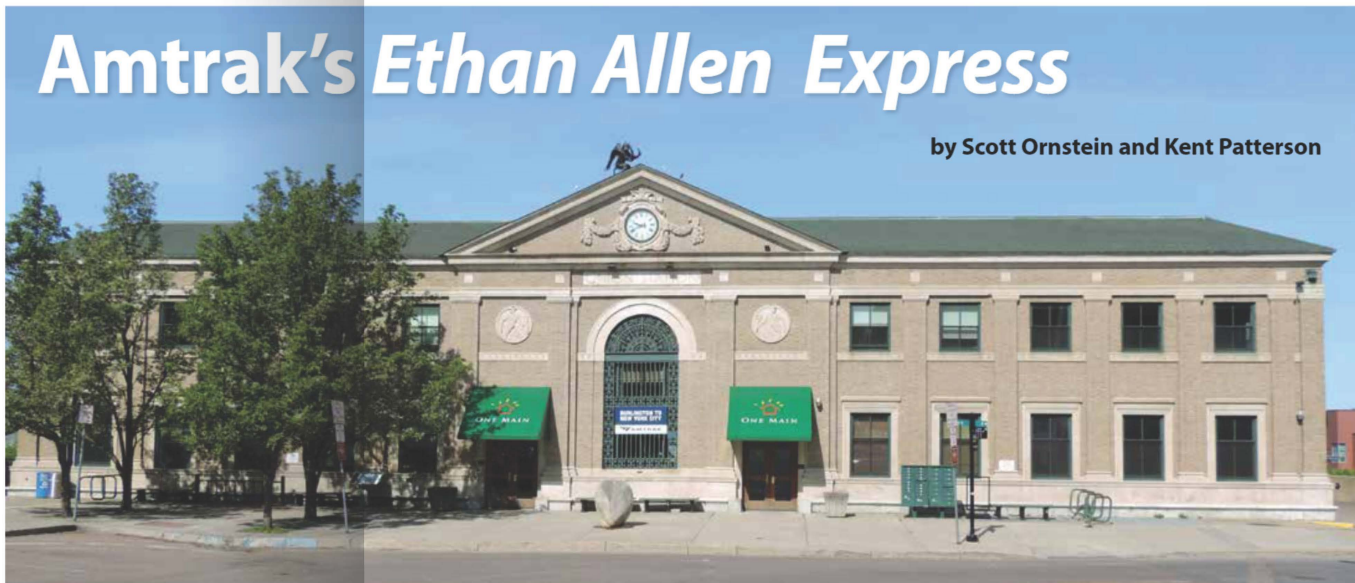


trailblazer



Amtrak's *Ethan Allen Express*

by Scott Ornstein and Kent Patterson

ABOVE As passengers make their way along Penn Station's Track 7 platform, the crew of Amtrak P32AC-DM 702 awaits the departure of Train 291, the northbound *Ethan Allen Express* destined for Rutland and Burlington, Vt., on May 16, 2022.

UPPER RIGHT In stark contrast with the gloomy depths of the train's southern terminus, passengers arriving at and departing from the north end of the *Ethan Allen's* route are served by the restored Burlington Union Station. The building opened in January 1916 to serve Rutland Railroad and Central Vermont passenger trains. CV service ended in 1938, and Rutland's final train called in 1953. Perched on the station's roof today are four flying monkey sculptures, the first two of which were created by artist Steve Larrabee (1950-2011) in 1975 for a Wizard of Oz-themed waterbed store in Burlington. The store is gone, but the monkeys survived, eventually finding their way, in 1996, to the former station at One Main Street, where they were joined by a pair of young offspring in 2005.

FAR RIGHT A departure board in Moynihan Train Hall on May 16, with just over 10 minutes until the *Ethan Allen's* departure. *ALL, SCOTT ORNSTEIN*

Amtrak's *Ethan Allen Express* (trains 291 northbound and 290 southbound) was at long last extended to Burlington, Vermont's largest city, on July 29, 2022. From the time of the train's debut in 1996, its northern terminus was in Rutland, in south-central Vermont. Burlington had last seen regular intercity rail passenger service in 1953, when Rutland Railroad passenger operations were suspended.

Active efforts to reach Burlington with Amtrak service started in 2005, with the first of several federal grants — \$30 million for track improvements — obtained by U.S. Senator Jim Jeffords (I-Vt.). Momentum then stalled for several years in a dry spell for passenger rail development, but progress resumed in 2013 when a series of piecemeal grants allowed this project to continue. Annual funding came in small increments, often less than \$10 million at a time, with the money targeted for specific projects including welded-rail track improvements, a major bridge/tunnel project in downtown Middlebury, a new layover track and facility in Burlington yard, crossing upgrades, track

realignment at Burlington Union Station, and new station platforms. There were also matching contributions from the state of Vermont and Vermont Rail System (VRS, the host railroad north of Whitehall, N.Y.). This project also enjoyed bipartisan political support from its origins through completion.

Your co-authors were unable to make it to Burlington for the inaugural runs in July 2022, but with the days getting longer as the one-year anniversary of this extension approached, we felt that mid-May 2023 was a good time to make this long-awaited trip, so we ventured north to Burlington and back to New York City on the *Ethan Allen Express*.

Northbound trip

The *Ethan Allen Express* was last covered in *PTJ* Issue 269 (2016-4), with an update in Issue 293 (2022-4). Not much of the route has changed between New York City and Rutland since that 2016 story ran, except for the opening of the Moynihan Train Hall at Penn Station. That's where Scott boarded the train for this trip, while Kent joined at

Croton-Harmon. The contrast between the old Penn Station and Moynihan is quite stark. Granted, the Long Island Rail Road concourse has been greatly improved in recent years, with a new street entrance from 7th Avenue, and a newly constructed ceiling which is much higher than it was before. Still, this subterranean accessway leaves much to be desired. Boarding a short escalator from LIRR's "lower" level to the "upper" level, travelers are deposited right in front of the 2002-vintage NJTransit concourse. Not much has changed here since it was constructed. Some feel that it looks dated now, and that would not be totally inaccurate, but it really is fine. Walking west on this level, travelers come to the former Amtrak concourse, which is now only used by NJTransit. This area does look dated (and it is), and while Amtrak trains are posted on the information monitors in this part of the complex, there are no Amtrak services available here.

All Amtrak operations have moved across 8th Avenue to the Moynihan Train Hall, accessed using an escalator from what was Amtrak's concourse leading to

the corner of 8th Avenue and West 33rd Street, thence across the avenue and into the new facility. All Amtrak trains can be reached from here, and most, though not all, NJTransit trains can be too (unless your train is departing from Tracks 1-4, which cannot be accessed from Moynihan). Mimicking the original Penn Station's soaring arches and natural light, Moynihan provides a more-than-acceptable gateway to New York City, which is exactly what Amtrak intended. The concourse is open and airy, and information and Amtrak services are readily available. There is also a food court and restrooms, which, several years after originally opening, are still in very good condition.

Public address announcements indicated that the *Ethan Allen Express* would depart from Track 7. Upon descending the escalator to the Track 7/8 platform, we were greeted by Amtrak P32AC-DM 702, painted, like the other locomotives in this small dual-mode fleet, in Amtrak's Phase III "cigar-band" motif (Scott's favorite), which would be the power for most of our journey to Burlington that





ABOVE With a blue flag tucked into the coupler, P32AC-DM 702 is fueled on Track 3 at Amtrak's Albany-Rensselaer, N.Y., station. SCOTT ORNSTEIN

MIDDLE At the rear of the northbound Ethan Allen Express during its Albany-Rensselaer stop, a second P32AC-DM is added to permit a change of direction at Rutland, Vt., simplifying the onward journey north to Burlington. KEVIN PATTERSON

FAIR RIGHT Night had fallen by the time of the Ethan Allen's arrival at Burlington. SCOTT ORNSTEIN

BELOW On-board food service is offered from Amtrak's Northeast Regional Cafe Car menu.

Cafe Car MENU



NORTHEAST
REGIONAL

day. Behind unit 702 was a five-car Amfleet consist: four coaches, with an Amfleet on the rear (south) end of the train. We co-boarded with a *Keystone Service* train to Harrisburg, which was on Track 8.

Today's *Ethan Allen Express* operates on the same schedule daily, departing New York at 2:21PM with a Burlington arrival at 9:49PM. The southbound trip departs Burlington at 10:10AM and arrives in New York at 5:45PM. This is different than in 2016, when the northbound departures had two different times, and the southbound departures had three, with the time differences on the weekend trains catering to different clientele that typically rode the trains on weekends. The change to a consistent daily schedule was made to reduce customer confusion under the previous schedule, and for operational reasons due to the extension to Burlington.

An on-time departure took us through the Empire Tunnel, then up the west side of Manhattan on Amtrak tracks once operated by New York Central. We soon crossed over the Spuyten Duyvil swing bridge, where we joined Metro-North tracks. We cruised up the east shore of the Hudson River on a beautiful May afternoon, with the air temperature 82 degrees at departure time. We stopped for pickups at Yonkers and Croton-Harmon, and continued north to Poughkeepsie, just north of which we left Metro-North territory and joined CSX-owned trackage that is dispatched and maintained by Amtrak. Next, we stopped at the under-reconstruction



Rhinecliff station, followed by Hudson, and 2½ hours after departure from Moynihan Train Hall/Penn Station, we arrived at Albany-Rensselaer. As we ventured north, a frontal system was approaching the Northeastern part of the country, and almost from the beginning of our trip, the clouds from the leading edge of the front joined us, with the front passing through during our journey to Vermont.

At Albany-Rensselaer, the 15-minute stop allowed a quick visit up to the station concourse to use a real restroom and purchase a few sundries. During this break, fuel was added to the 702, we had a crew change (all except the café attendant), and P32AC-DM 717 was coupled onto the south end of the train consist. (Upon arrival at Rutland, we would reverse direction to continue north to Burlington, with 717 in the lead and 702 trailing.)

With a couple of toots on 702's horn, we were soon on our way again, passing Amtrak's Albany-Rensselaer shops before making a sweeping left turn to traverse the Livingston Avenue Bridge, which dates to 1902, and carries the tracks over the Hudson River with the downtown Albany skyline looming over the west side of the river. After crossing the bridge, on the right or north side of the tracks, we passed the ancient Central Warehouse building, which scotched Amtrak's inaugural celebration of the *Ethan Allen Express* Burlington extension in July 2022 when it shed part of its facade along the right-of-way on the first day of Burlington service. This re-

quired a bus bridge between Saratoga Springs and Albany-Rensselaer until the building was stabilized. Next came Albany's suburbs as we passed the State University of New York (SUNY) Albany campus, as well as the W. Averill Harriman State Office Building Campus.

The Schenectady station was next, soon after passing the huge General Electric campus, and the massive "GE" sign atop one of its buildings. The Schenectady station was originally built in 1908 and demolished in 1971. It was then replaced by a small contemporary structure in 1979, with a station in nearby Colonie used in the interim. In 2017, after *PTJ's* previous *Ethan Allen Express* story was published, this building was demolished, and a new Amtrak station building with new platforms was constructed. Although there was no time for us to check out the station on this trip, the new building has been well received.

Departing Schenectady, we switched onto the former Delaware & Hudson (D&H) Railroad, now CPKC trackage, as we headed to the Saratoga Springs station which was built by D&H in 1956 and was spruced up in the early 2000s. We arrived at Saratoga on time, but had to wait at the station for Amtrak's 10-minute-delayed southbound *Adirondack*, Train 68, to arrive from Montreal. Departing Saratoga, we left the Hudson River watershed, headed toward the St. Lawrence River and the Lake Champlain watershed. Between here and Whitehall, N.Y., we sometimes paralleled the Cham-



plain Canal, which links the south-flowing Hudson River with the northward drift of Lake Champlain and its tributaries. In northwest Vermont, the rivers flow north, which, although counterintuitive, is quite common across the country.

Next up was the Fort Edward-Glens Falls, N.Y., station, where we were now 13 minutes late, then continued north to near Whitehall, N.Y., where the tracks made a sharp turn to the east. From New York City to this point south of Whitehall, the *Ethan Allen Express* had traveled at various speeds, frequently 60-79 mph, topping out over Amtrak's Empire Corridor with 95-105 mph spurts to Albany/Rensselaer and Schenectady. Now on the tracks of the former Rutland Railroad, currently operated by Vermont Rail System's Clarendon & Pittsford Railroad, we continued our trek east, paralleling U.S. Route 4 heading toward Vermont. Track speed was generally 59 mph, though we did have some slow orders just west of the Vermont border. As was the case seven years ago, there is also still some slow 20 mph "stick rail" trackage east of Fair Haven, Vt., once home to an Amtrak station, now moved a few miles east to Castleton, Vt., where we arrived 17 minutes late. This stretch of track is slated to get Continuously Welded Rail (CWR), which will allow increased speeds up to 59 mph, like most of the route north of Rutland. Castleton, like the other Vermont stations on this route, has limited hours, though they are generally open during a two-hour window around the

train's arrival/departure times. Contract personnel are employed by Amtrak to operate and maintain these stations.

Continuing east with the last rays of daylight, the track condition improved significantly, with speeds back up to 59 mph for a few miles as we approached Rutland. After a 14-minute stop at the pleasant station there, the engineer changed ends and the train then changed direction. Departing nine minutes late, we backtracked one mile to Center Rutland (where the former depot is now the Rutland Railroad Museum) on what is in effect a wye into the Rutland station, and onto the state of Vermont-owned, Vermont Rail System-operated trackage to Burlington. We were finally reaching the real reason for our journey and this story. Unfortunately, daylight was lost, and the remainder of our ride was in near total darkness. In deference to this fact, we will cover the remainder of the journey between Rutland and Burlington in the southbound section. For now, let's skip ahead to Burlington.

Burlington, Vt.

Burlington's three-car-length, single-track platform, with its two-car-length canopy, is still festooned with Amtrak banners announcing the inauguration of service in 2022. Behind the platform is Burlington Union Station, with its ground floor repurposed into a waiting room once again. The upper two floors, including the second, which is at street level, were long ago converted to office space. The building's history as a train station

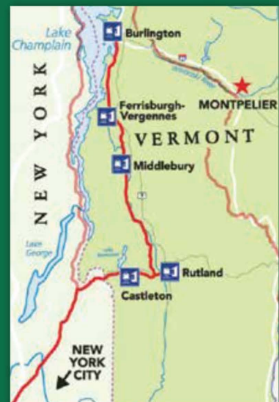


ABOVE: The airy waiting room in Burlington's station.

MIDDLE: Train 290 prior to its departure from Burlington, with P32AC-DM 702 on the rear.

FAIR RIGHT: Situated on the shore of Lake Champlain, Burlington offers plenty of dining, lodging, and sightseeing choices. THREE PHOTOS, SCOTT ORNSTEIN

BELOW: The Ethan Allen Express route (in dark red) serves these five stations in Vermont, with Middlebury, Ferrisburgh-Vergennes, and Burlington part of the 2022 service expansion. VTRANS / AMTRAK



remain, with signage on the front and rear façades, and a large clock placed at the roofline facing downtown Burlington. The station was originally constructed in 1916 and served Rutland and Central Vermont (CV) passenger trains until 1953, when Rutland suspended its service, as CV had done in 1938.

We arrived at Burlington at 9:37 PM, 12 minutes ahead of schedule. The trainset which had brought us up from New York idled on the platform for a few minutes before the crew deadheaded the equipment about a mile south of Union Station to the VRS yard, where it would be cleaned and serviced overnight in preparation for its return trip south to New York the following morning. While awaiting its departure, we were greeted by Al Vila, Amtrak's Burlington station attendant, who gave us a quick overview of the station and of Burlington itself.

Union Station is within walking distance of much of downtown Burlington, though most of the city is located uphill from the station. The previously mentioned frontal system had passed through the region, dropping the temperature from 82 degrees at our departure from New York to about 45 degrees plus a windchill off Lake Champlain by the time we arrived in Burlington. This, plus the late hour, made the proximity of our hotel quite beneficial. Before long we were in our rooms at the Hilton Garden Inn a few blocks up Main Street from Union Station. We had decided not to rush our return to New York the next

morning, and instead stayed a full day in Burlington to explore the city, departing the following day, 36 hours after our arrival.

Located on a hillside overlooking Lake Champlain, Burlington is a compact city of 45,000 that is home to two colleges: the public University of Vermont and private Champlain College. Downtown Burlington has several sites that are worth exploring, including the waterside ECHO Leahy Center, an aquarium focused on Lake Champlain, and the *Spirit of Ethan Allen*, a tour boat offering various types of cruises on the lake. Both attractions are located across the tracks from the station. Up the hill in downtown is the Church Street Marketplace, which is a four-block-long complex of restaurants and shops catering to locals and visitors alike.

Also in the city are performing arts venues, several hotels with lake views, shops, galleries, and no shortage of interesting eating establishments. Architecture in the neighborhoods keeps an old-city look and feel, notably in terms of layout and landscaping, consisting of abundant well-kept 19th-century buildings, some of which have been repurposed while still meeting contemporary needs. In fact, part of our Hilton Garden Inn was once the city's Armory. Burlington relies on renewable energy, and the most important freight rail customer in the city is a woodchip-fired power plant in the Intervale area that uses what otherwise would have been discarded materials from a local paper mill.

There is also the Burlington Greenway Bike Path, part of the Island Line Trail, which is a 12-mile recreational path running along the eastern shore of Lake Champlain, from two miles south of downtown Burlington to just south of South Hero, Vt. An additional 13th mile is included if the Local Motion Island Line Bike Ferry is operational. The bike path follows Rutland Railroad's "Island Line" and is located partially on a causeway traversing Mallet Bay on Lake Champlain.

As noted earlier, there are many culinary choices in Burlington, especially at the Church Street Marketplace, but also elsewhere downtown. We were able to snag a table for dinner on short notice at the famed Leunig's, but also enjoyed more casual meals at August First and the Kountry Kart Deli. All are within walking distance of Burlington Union Station.

Sadly, missing from Burlington's waterfront is the Lake Champlain Transportation Company ferry operation, which traversed the lake to Port Kent, N.Y. Whether used as transportation between there and Burlington, or just for sightseeing, a ferry ride was long a highlight of a trip to Burlington. Operation of this route was suspended after the 2019 season, a victim of declining ridership followed by the continued impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is unclear when, or even if, the Burlington-Port Kent route will resume. The ferry company's two other cross-lake routes continue to operate, but they are located well to the south and

north of downtown Burlington and are only accessible by automobile.

Southbound trip

Our return trip from Burlington was on a still-brisk morning, even for mid-May, as we walked the two blocks downhill to Union Station. Returning south in daylight gave us the opportunity to view what was missed on our northbound trip between Rutland and Burlington, due to the late hour of that trip and the resultant darkness. Once again, we were met by Al Vila, the station attendant, but also by the very friendly Amtrak train crew, Conductor Tara Lobdell and Assistant Conductor Ashley Beesmer. The two of them made a terrific team for our trip down to Albany-Rensselaer. Amtrak P32AC-DM 704 would lead our five-car train south to Rutland on the VRS-operated tracks, where engine 702 (which took us northbound from Penn Station two days earlier) would carry us on the remainder of our trip to New York.

Upon departure, we skirted the eastern shore of Lake Champlain, now in daylight, paralleling the southern end of the Burlington Greenway Recreation Path separating us from the lake. On the east side of the train, we soon passed the VRS headquarters and yard where our train had been serviced overnight. Rural Vermont sped by us at 59 mph, framed by New York's Adirondack Mountains in the background to the west and Vermont's own Green Mountains to the east. There were also some unique Vermont sights, such as the child and his father sitting

outside of their car near a grade crossing waving to the train. Clearly a regular activity for them, the little boy seemed to be holding his hands to his ears so as not to get the full blast of the train's horn as we blew by them.

We passed through South Burlington, a suburb of the city, followed by Charlotte, with its remnants of the station that was the southernmost point of the short-lived *Champlain Flyer* commuter service. This train operated from 2000-2003 and used Burlington Union Station as its northern terminus, with intermediate stops at South Burlington and Shelburne. The service was meant to be a traffic reliever during the reconstruction of nearby U.S. Route 7, but it never really caught on as the construction project was delayed. The *Champlain Flyer* was prematurely suspended in early 2003. VRS still runs occasional excursion trains between Burlington and Charlotte, using the *Champlain Valley Flyer* moniker.

We arrived at Ferrisburgh-Vergennes station, with its Victorian-looking two-story building standing guard behind the new three-car-length platform, four minutes ahead of schedule and held there until our departure time. Interestingly, this is an original Rutland Railroad station that served passenger trains until the 1953 suspension of Rutland's passenger service. The building fell into disrepair, but with the extension of the *Ethan Allen Express* beckoning, Vermont's Agency of Transportation (VTrans) had the building moved approximately 1,000 feet from its original location in the Town of Ver-



ABOVE The station at Ferrisburgh-Vergennes, VT, viewed through an Amfleet window of the southbound *Ethan Allen Express*.

MIDDLE This eccentric metal sculpture greets passengers at Amtrak's Rutland, VT, depot.

FAR RIGHT Passengers board the southbound train at Castleton, VT.

BELOW A dynamic duo: Conductor Tara Lobdell (left) and Assistant Conductor Ashley Beesmer (right) were a terrific team on the southbound leg of our May 2023 trip between Burlington and Albany-Rensselaer. *ALL, SCOTT ORNSTEIN*



gennes to the location of the Ferrisburgh Park & Ride facility in 2012, hence the hyphenated station name. The building was also completely restored. The cost of these projects was covered with both federal and state funding.

Another 18 minutes of travel through verdant Vermont countryside, offering views of woodlands, meadows, farms, and a few eccentric looking back yards, brought us to the Middlebury station, where we arrived and departed on time. The Middlebury station does not have a building of its own, just a three-car-length platform. The original depot has been restored but is privately owned and not in railroad service. Middlebury, however, posed an interesting quandary for VTrans.

According to Carl Fowler, a Vermont Rail Advisory Council member, there was a century-old street bridge structure over the tracks adjacent to the falls of Otter Creek. The bridge was corroded and urgently needed replacement. The proximity of the creek made additional drainage essential, and VRS needed to improve clearances to allow modern double-stack and high/wide freight cars to pass. The result was a complete rebuild, with a custom-designed tunnel installed on a completely new grade to accommodate the VRS tracks. The clearance is now 19 feet.

We moved at a pretty good clip until we entered Pittsford, Vt., where an extended slow order of 10-20 mph set back our progress to Rutland, but where we still arrived 19 minutes early. VTrans' investment in rebuilding the track be-



tween Rutland and Burlington for passengers was evident in this new segment, as we cruised along at a steady 58 mph except for this and a few other shorter slow orders.

At Rutland, the train changed ends with 702 now leading. Since we arrived early, passengers were able to get out and stretch their legs for a few extra minutes while awaiting the 12:20PM departure. (Be forewarned, even if the train is early, resist the temptation to go to the nearby shopping center during this short layover period; the crew will not take attendance before the train departs again.)

The *Ethan Allen Express* resumed its southbound trek on-time from Rutland, first heading west for one more Vermont stop, Castleton, before crossing back into New York State south of Whitehall, where we left VRS tracks and rejoined CPKC's former D&H route. Greeted by a slow order from Whitehall to Fort Edward on CPKC, our progress slowed to a crawl for a little while, compounded by our need to wait for Amtrak Train 69, the northbound *Adirondack*, to finish its work at Saratoga Springs. This set us back about 20 minutes, as that was our delay arriving at Fort Edward-Glens Falls and at Saratoga Springs.

We cruised through CSX territory from Schenectady to Albany-Rensselaer, where we arrived eight minutes late. We changed operating crews there, and unit 704 was uncoupled from the north end of the train and shuffled north to the Rensselaer Maintenance Facility to await its next assignment. Our depart-

ure was also eight minutes late, and that delay crept back up as we headed south through Hudson, Rhinecliff, Poughkeepsie, Croton-Harmon, and Yonkers, these last three stops being in Metro-North territory. However, we arrived back at Penn Station in New York exactly on time.

All in all, we covered 310 miles in each direction, operating on the tracks of five different railroads: Amtrak, CSX, Metro-North, CPKC, and VRS. Our final destination arrivals were on time or early.

Some observations and a look down the line

Carl Fowler is a long-term rail activist and former rail tour operator, and pointed out that Vermont now enjoys same-day Amtrak connections, thanks to the *Ethan Allen Express*, westward to the Amtrak national network via the *Lake Shore Limited*. Using the Vermont Translines bus option to board Amtrak trains at Albany, Vermonters can now also connect to points south of Washington, D.C., as well. Same-day connections are also possible with the Northeast Corridor on both Amtrak Vermont routes, the *Ethan Allen Express* and the *Vermont*.

Ridership on the *Ethan Allen Express* is impressive for its first year of operation on the extended route. Almost 22,000 passengers traveled through Burlington in the one-year period from the start of service on July 29, 2022, through July 31, 2023. More than 13,000 used Ferrisburgh-Vergennes, 9,200 used Middlebury, close to 20,000 used Rutland, and about 5,900 rode to or from Castleton. This averages approximately 120 passen-



gers per day for the Vermont stations on this route. Our observations of ridership on the trains we rode were consistent with Amtrak's data. The *Ethan Allen Express* is proving very strong among college students, with many using it for travel to and from Burlington, Middlebury, and Castleton in Vermont, all homes to colleges or universities.

While much ridership on the *Ethan Allen Express* skews heavily to Hudson Valley stations south of Albany-Rensselaer, this train is really intended for stations north of New York State's capital. Schenectady is also a major stop, but is served by several other Amtrak trains.

Our Tuesday northbound trip was roughly 60 percent full departing from New York, with about 33 percent of riders detouring below Albany. Interestingly, we had a bike passenger who boarded at Saratoga and traveled to Burlington, and said he used the bike as his intermodal connection, weather permitting.

Ridership returning south on Thursday was slightly higher as we were closer to the weekend; however, most of those riders boarded at Saratoga Springs and south. Below Albany-Rensselaer, we became an 80-percent-full train, and heard regular crew announcements asking people to "take one seat, please."

Fowler is now working with VTrans to have Amtrak block the seats in one or two of the four coaches generally used on the train, until perhaps three days prior to departure, for "above Albany-Rensselaer" and Vermont passengers. This would mitigate the problem

for these riders getting seats to points south of Albany, which frequently sell out. This seems fair given that Vermont subsidizes much of the cost of the train north of Albany.

As an example of this phenomenon, looking at the southbound *Ethan Allen Express* on Amtrak's website for Memorial Day, May 29, illustrated how this train fills up on busy days. Vermont stations accounted for about 150 passengers, filling about 40 percent of the train. After stops at Saratoga, Albany, Hudson, and Rhinecliff, the train filled to sold-out status. The drawback here was that Vermont passengers saw a sold-out train well in advance, as many seats are sold in advance below Albany. Yes, you could have bought a ticket from Vermont on Memorial Day; however, Hudson, N.Y., was the farthest south you could have ridden the train.

Closing thoughts

Our journey on the *Ethan Allen Express* was a pleasant, operationally uneventful trip. It may have taken a long time to complete the extension to Burlington, but that does not matter anymore. It is done now, and that is what counts. Recent reports show ridership expanding on both the *Ethan Allen Express* and on the *Vermont*. That is good news for everyone, especially Vermont's residents and visitors who use these trains. More importantly, our experience seems indicative of the general operation of the *Ethan Allen Express*, and that can only mean good things moving forward. **PA**