



**Name of Property:** Western Railroad Stone Arch Bridges and Chester Factory Village Depot

**City, State:** Becket, Middlefield, and Chester, Massachusetts

**Period of Significance:** 1838–1867

**NHL Criteria:** 1, 2 and 4; Exception 2

**NHL Theme:** V. Developing the American Economy  
3. Transportation and Communication  
VI. Expanding Science and Technology  
2. Technological Applications

**Previous Recognition:** 1980 National Register of Historic Places (contributing resources, Middlefield-Becket Stone Arch Railroad Bridge District)  
1989 National Register of Historic Places (Chester Factory Village Depot)  
Historic American Engineering Record

**National Historic Context:** XVIII. Engineering and Invention  
B. Transportation

**NHL Significance:**

- The Western Railroad Stone Arch Bridges and Chester Factory Village Depot are nationally significant under NHL Criterion 1 as surviving components of the Western Railroad, which connected Worcester, Massachusetts, with Albany, New York. When completed in 1841, the Western was the longest railroad constructed and operated in the United States by a single corporation and was one of the first four interregional railroads in the country. The innovative management hierarchy of the Western Railroad’s corporate structure set a new standard that was subsequently copied by many American corporations.
- The railroad segment and bridges are nationally significant under NHL Criterion 2 as the best representative works and highest achievement of George Washington Whistler (1800–1849), one of the country’s leading practitioners of civil engineering in the early nineteenth century and a pioneering designer of railroads.
- The railroad segment and bridges are nationally significant as an intact segment of the first railroad in the United States—perhaps the world—to demonstrate the feasibility of moving trains across a mountain range using only traction, or the friction between the



wheels of the train and the tracks, for propulsion and braking. To accomplish the mountain ascent, the Western Railroad, with Whistler as its lead engineer, built a group of ten large masonry arch bridges and made extensive cuts and fills to accommodate the roadbed within a winding three-mile section of the Westfield River Valley. As surviving components of that section of railroad, the Western Railroad Stone Arch Bridges, and the segment of Western Railroad Roadbed that connects them, exemplify the engineering accomplishment of the mountain crossing and are therefore eligible under NHL Criterion 4.

- The Chester Factory Village Depot meets Criterion Exception 2 since it was moved only a short distance to the east side of the tracks in 1990 to save it from demolition. It retains significance and integrity as one of few remaining examples of a pre-Civil War, post-and-beam Western Railroad depot, and is the only extant depot on the difficult segment of the line through the mountains of western Massachusetts.

**Integrity:**

- The Stone Arch Bridges and Railbed convey the Western Railroad’s significance as one of America’s earliest regional railroads, the country’s first mountain railroad, and as a work of George Washington Whistler. The design, materials, and workmanship of the three structures remain intact, excepting the railroad tracks, ties, and ballast—perhaps the most substantial impingement on the grouping’s collective integrity. The roadbed and bridges maintain their original alignment without any apparent widening or alteration. As a group, the bridges’ massive masonry arches and retaining walls, combined with the rock and earth cuts, embankments, and frequent and tight radius curves of the Western Railroad Roadbed, demonstrate the boldness of vision and strenuous manual labor that were necessary to build the Western Railroad through mountains in a remote part of Massachusetts in the 1830s and 1840s. The location and setting of the structures in the narrow, isolated mountain valley readily convey the challenges that Whistler faced in designing and constructing the railroad. Although the nominated resources are on an inactive portion of railroad line, the remainder of the Western Railroad’s historical right-of-way is still actively used by trains that are visible from the property and serve to enhance the setting, feeling, and association of the resources.
- The Chester Factory Village Depot was removed from its original location, but otherwise retains its original north–south orientation parallel to the tracks at the east end of Main Street in Chester and much of its original historic fabric. A sensitive renovation to repair deteriorated or missing elements was completed in the 1990s. Overall, the depot’s integrity of materials, workmanship, design, setting, feeling, and association remains intact.

**Owner of the Property:** The Massachusetts Department of Fish & Game is the owner of the Stone Arch Bridges and Railbed, and the Chester Foundation, Inc. owns the Chester Railroad Station.

**Acreage of Property:** 4.53 acres

**Originus of Nomination:** The nomination was initiated by the Friends of the Keystone Arches,

Inc. (FKA), a nonprofit group that was formed in 2004 to assist in public planning efforts to preserve and provide access to the Stone Arch Bridges.

**Potential for Positive Public Response or Reflection on NHL Program:**

- NHL recognition has the potential to increase public awareness of the significance of the structures and facilitate subsequent educational and preservation efforts.

**Potential for Negative Public Response or Reflection on NHL Program:** None is known.

**Public Comments (received as of September 9, 2020):**

- New York State Historic Preservation Office – 8/31/2020
- Judith Hoag, Chair, Middlefield Board of Selectmen – 8/31/2020
- Chester Board of Selectmen – 8/24/2020
- David Pierce, President, Chester Foundation – 8/21/2020
- David Pierce, President, Friends of Keystone Arches, Inc. – 8/21/2020

**National Historic Landmark Committee Comments:**

- Add information about two other early railroad viaducts that are still in existence.
- Add explanation about the depot serving several functions and how that affected its design.
- Note information about the corporate railroad structure that is represented by this railroad.
- Add additional photos and maps.

**National Historic Landmark Committee Recommendations:**

The Committee recommends that the National Park System Advisory Board recommend to the Secretary of the Interior the designation of the Western Railroad Stone Arch Bridges and Chester Factory Village Depot in Becket, Middlefield, and Chester, Massachusetts as a National Historic Landmark, with any additions and corrections as noted by the Committee being made prior to the nomination being forwarded to the Secretary of the Interior for action.

**Advisory Board Recommendation:**

The National Park System Advisory Board finds that the Western Railroad Stone Arch Bridges and Chester Factory Village Depot in Becket, Middlefield, and Chester, Massachusetts, meets the criteria for designation as a National Historic Landmark and recommends that the Secretary of the Interior designate this property as a National Historic Landmark once any additions and corrections suggested by the National Historic Landmark Committee of the Advisory Board have been addressed.