In the 1820’s, 10 years before railroads entered the transportation picture, a group of Orange County businessmen lobbied for the planned Delaware and Hudson (D&H) Canal to cross Orange County. In 1825 these gentlemen proposed that a tunnel be dug through the Shawangunk ridge so that a canal be built through Orange County to Newburgh where it would join the Hudson River. Since one of the strong backers of the D&H Canal was George Duncan Wicklum, a prominent citizen of Orange County and a member of the D&H Board, the D&H Board of Managers had to treat the proposal seriously. Wicklum made a motion to the Board to explore alternatives to the planned route up the valley west of Shawangunk Mountain to Kingston on the Hudson and the board approved (Skye, 2009).

Benjamin Wright, the nation’s foremost canal engineer was asked to explore alternatives to the Kingston route. Wright evaluated the proposed Orange County route and determined that a tunnel two miles long would be needed and that the additional cost would be prohibitive. It is worth noting that the black powder blasting technology available at the time would surely have delayed the completion of the canal well beyond the actual completion date of 1829 when the canal was opened to Kingston (Skye, 2009).

Ten years after Wright rejected the idea of a D&H Canal tunnel, he had to consider the idea of a Shawangunk tunnel again. Wright had become the chief engineer for the New York and Erie (later the Erie) Railroad, designed to connect New York City with the Great Lakes region. He had to decide whether the Erie (the shorter, later name is used here) should cross the Shawangunks at Otisville by going over the top or through a tunnel. He opted for a deep cut through the Deerfield Gap at Otisville in the route plan he completed in 1835. He did not support the idea of a tunnel at the time since the amount of traffic expected could not justify the expense of a tunnel which he estimated would have to be over half a mile long. He did state in his report to the New York Secretary of State that in 20 years time the increase in the railroad’s business would demand that such a tunnel be built. Although ground was broken for the railroad in 1835, it was not until 1846 that construction really got underway. In 1847 the railroad finally accepted Wright’s recommendation and built the line through Deerfield Gap, proceeding on to Port Jervis and points west. In 1873 the Erie reconsidered its decision on building a tunnel, but nothing came of that effort (Skye, 2009). The Erie was originally built wide gauge (6 ft), but was converted to standard gauge (4 ft 8.5 in) on 22 June 1880. The Otisville cut probably owes its imposing width to the original wide gauge of the railroad.

Preliminary geologic map and section of the Otisville, New York measured and described by Chloe Wonnell, SUNY Oswego Geologic Field Camp, late May 2012.