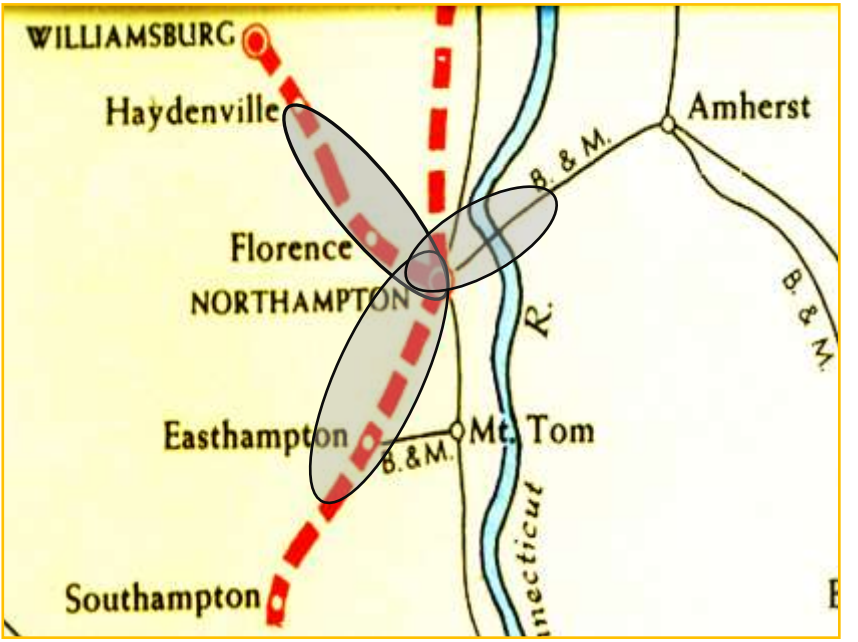
A Biking Tour of the former Williamsburg Branch and the Canal Division of the former New Haven Railroad AND the Mass Central Branch of the former Boston & Maine Railroad



Led by Craig Della Penna

Williamsburg Branch
(Mass Central Rail Trail)

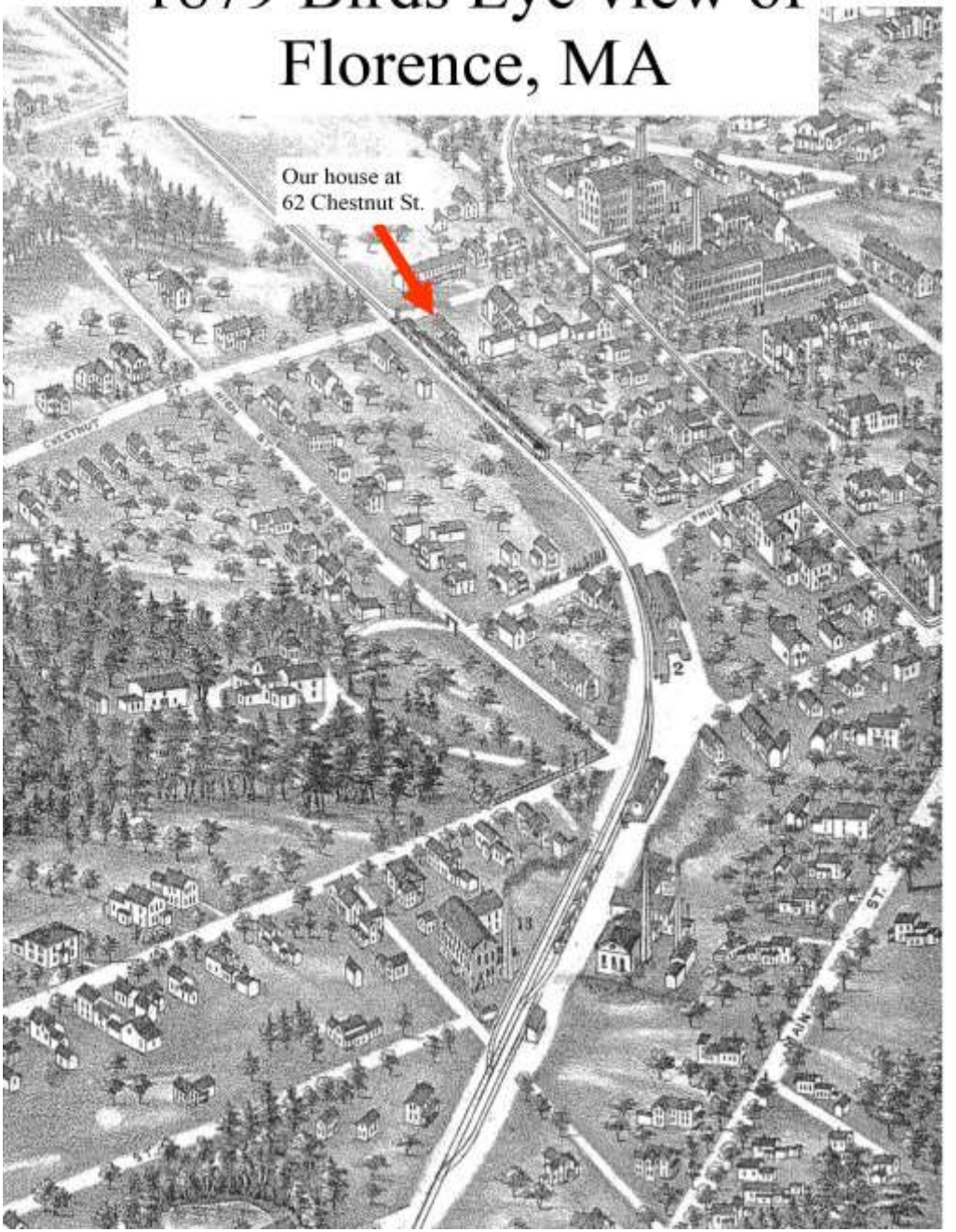
Original Owner: New Haven & Northampton Railroad Most commonly known owner: New Haven Railroad (Williamsburg Branch of the New Haven RR)
Built: 1867-1868
Last Passenger Train: 1922.
Abandoned: Williamsburg to Florence--1962; Florence to Easthampton 1969.
First proposed to convert to a bike-path: 1976
Ribbon cutting as the City of Northampton's Ryan Bikeway: 1984

Circa early 1960s view of the Florence Passenger Station looking toward the old Norwood Engineering Company. Station was torn down in 1965. Photo from BOB'S PHOTOS.

A Short Bio of Craig Della Penna

- Associate Broker at The Murphys Realtors working out of the office at 7 Main St in Florence Village Center. www.NorthamptonRealtor.com
- Executive Director of Norwottuck Network. A 501c3 set up to help get built-out, the longest rail trail in the north-east, the Mass Central Rail Trail. www.nnnetwork.net/
- I am the first Realtor in the US to specialize in the sale of houses near to rail trails and greenways.
- My practice was featured in a *BOSTON GLOBE* editorial, an article in the *WALL STREET JOURNAL* and in *United Airlines in-flight magazine—HEMISPHERES*.
- I am the author of five books.
- And interestingly, five books have been written that feature me in as a case study in: courage to quit a 9-5 job and instead, do what I love, creative marketing, 21st century branding etc.
- *THE RIDE MAGAZINE* named me as the most effective advocate for rail-to-trail issues on the eastern seaboard.
- I've given over 1,200 lectures on subjects related to rail trails in 21 states and Canadian provinces.
- Along with my wife, Kathleen, we also operate Sugar Maple Trailside Inn, a bed & breakfast located in a nicely restored, 1865 farmhouse that sits eight [8] feet away from the trail.
- The renovation here was so encompassing that we won the Historic Preservation Award from the City of Northampton and HGTV featured our house on one of their extreme makeover shows.

1879 Birds Eye view of Florence, MA



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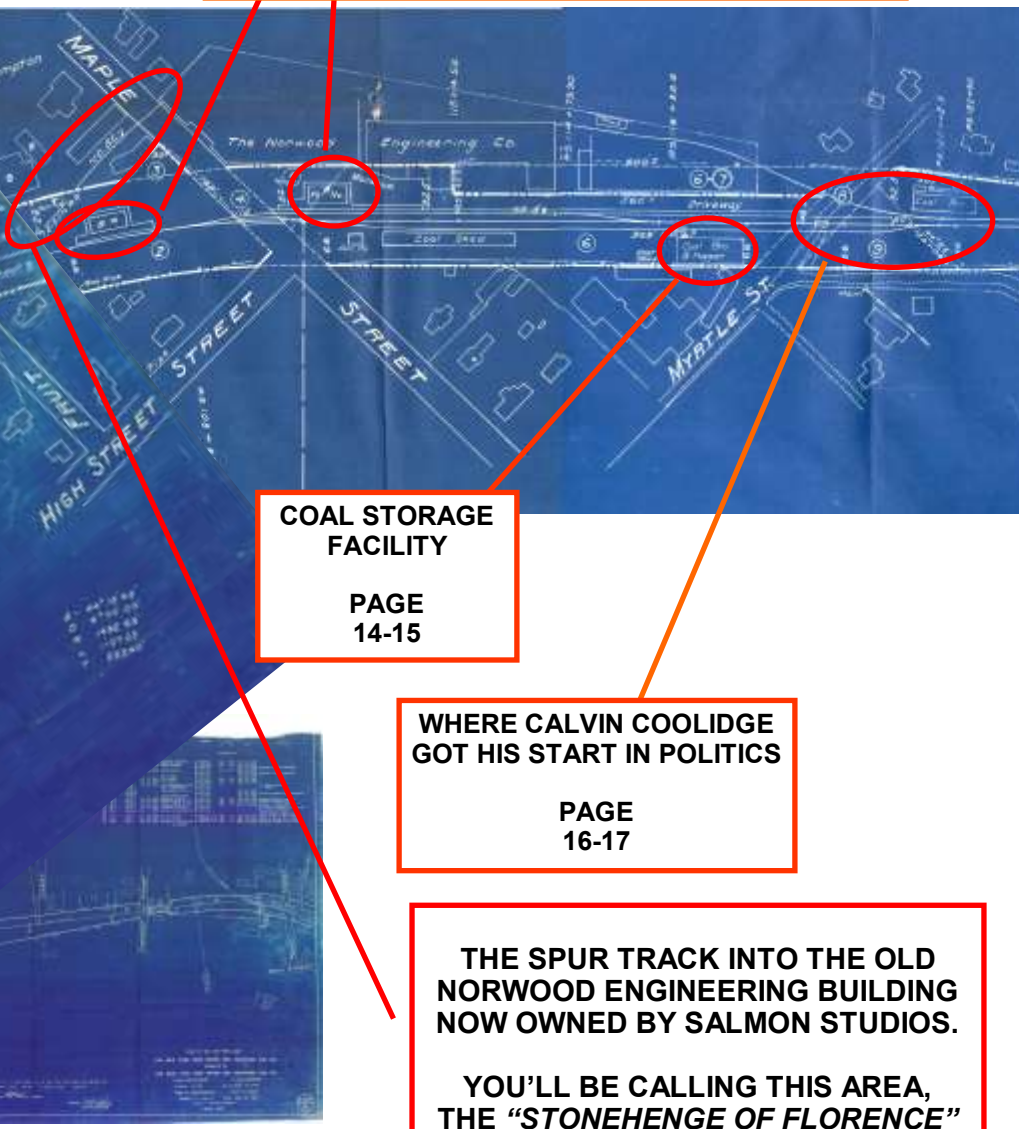

COAL STORAGE FACILITY

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WHERE CALVIN COOLIDGE GOT HIS START IN POLITICS

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THE SPUR TRACK INTO THE OLD NORWOOD ENGINEERING BUILDING NOW OWNED BY SALMON STUDIOS.

YOU'LL BE CALLING THIS AREA, THE *"STONEHENGE OF FLORENCE" FROM NOW ON.*

PAGE 10-11

Houses close to RR corridors? Here's how our house ended up with a railroad next to it for 101 years.

Corridor at this point is only 20 feet wide. This is one of narrowest "pinch points" of a railroad right-of-way in a residential nieghborhood in the U.S.

Here's a snippet as to how this happened

In the 1840s, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison all came to what today is called Florence—a village of Northampton. They came to set up a utopian society. And not wanting to do business w slave-trade cotton, they set up a silk industry. A few blocks from here they set up a huge Mulberry tree plantation. Silk worms only eat Mulberry tree leaves. Then they obtained from the Chinese, a way to spin silk into thread. If you have thread; you should be setting up a sewing machine factory.

Thus the Florence Sewing Machine factory was built a short distance away. In the 1850s Sojourner Truth and her friends sold the factory and they scattered away. During the Civil War the factory was running on overtime and of course the army was recruiting soldiers. The management of the factory went to the nine department heads and said, "Stay with the factory, don't go off to war, and we'll give all nine of you, a free house." "We'll build nine houses for your nine families on nearby Chestnut St." That was in 1865.

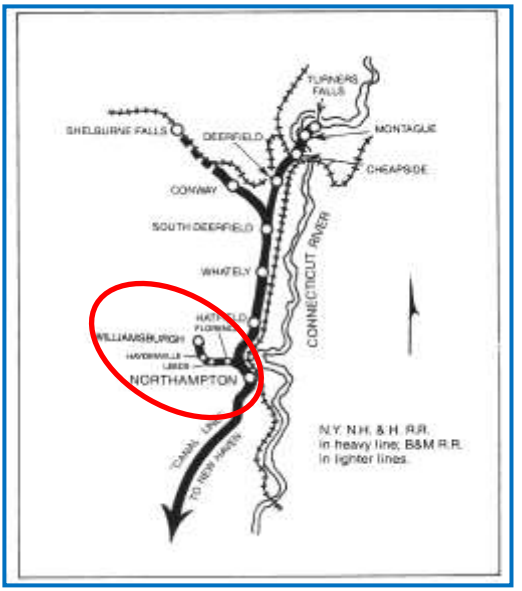
In 1868, the railroad came to Florence and the railroad officials did a mitigation effort here. They knew that the train being only 8 feet away was going to shake the house and likely crack the ceilings. So, as a mitigation against that happening they came in and nailed up from below, lath strips or furring strips to reinforce the plaster ceilings. Since that wasn't attractive, they hung below that, canvas ceilings. So taut that you can't see them drooping, but none the less the reinforced ceiling will hold and the canvas ceiling will flex.

The RR ran for 101 years till 1969. Then the idea of a trail conversion was broached in 1976. The family who lived here back then were not in favor of that but in the end the Ryan Bikeway opened in 1984. One of the earliest muni-built rail trails in the northeast.
The renovation was so dramatic that HGTV contacted us have it featured on the one of their fixer shows. Go to this site to see the short video. https://youtu.be/e_ceVsdDI7M

(PHOTO: top shows the house in 1999, two years before we bought it. While the lower photo shows it around 2003, after the renovation.)

TOWN OF NORTHAMPTON STATE OF MASS.
SCALE- 1" = 100 FT. DATE JUNE 30, 1915

A short story about how this short granite wall came to be here



This walking and biking trail used to be the right-of-way of the old Williamsburg Branch of the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad.

The right-of way was acquired by the railroad in 1866 and it was built and open by 1868.

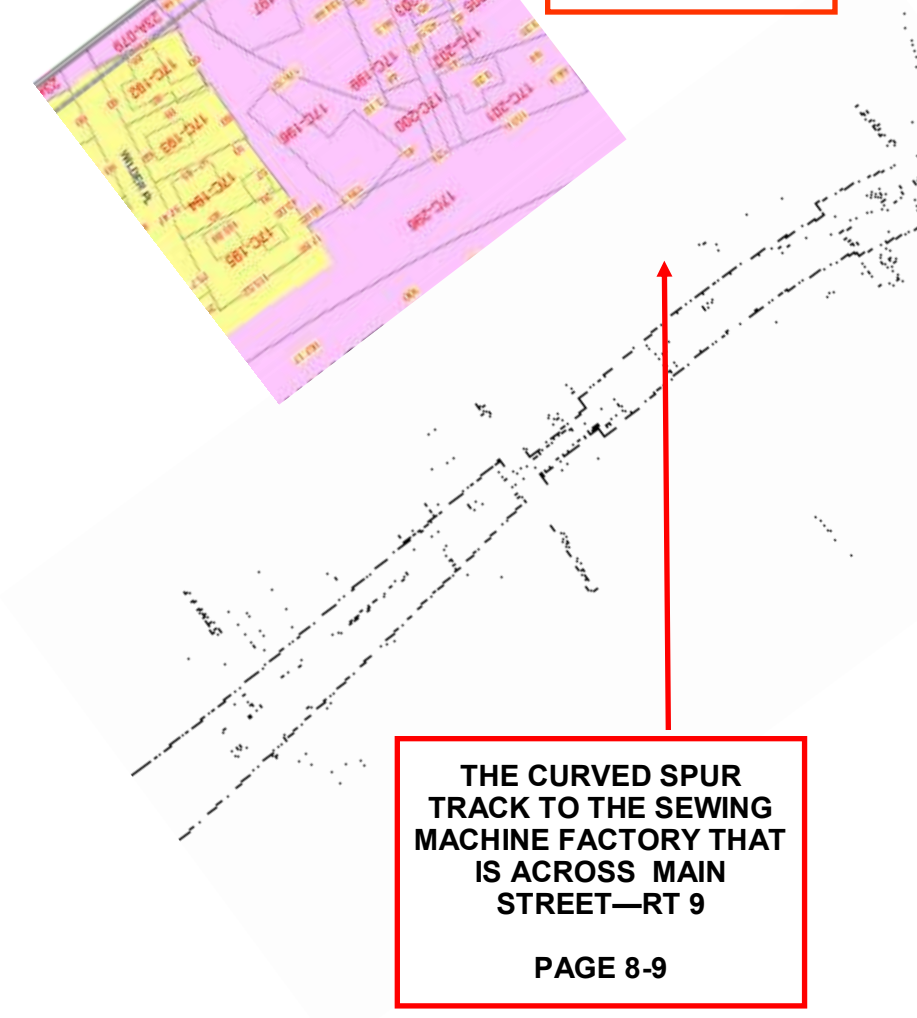
There was a steady 1.6% grade designed by the railroad coming up the hill from where Stop & Shop is today. The crest of that long hill from Northampton is pretty much near where you are standing today.

In order to maintain this grade, the railroad cut down the land of Chestnut St by about 2 feet and built the stone walls on both sides of the railroad corridor and in front of both of these houses on the Chestnut St side too.

Both of these houses are notable in that they were built just before the railroad came to town and they are among the closest to sit next to a railroad in the U.S.

Contemporary city parcel map to the left.

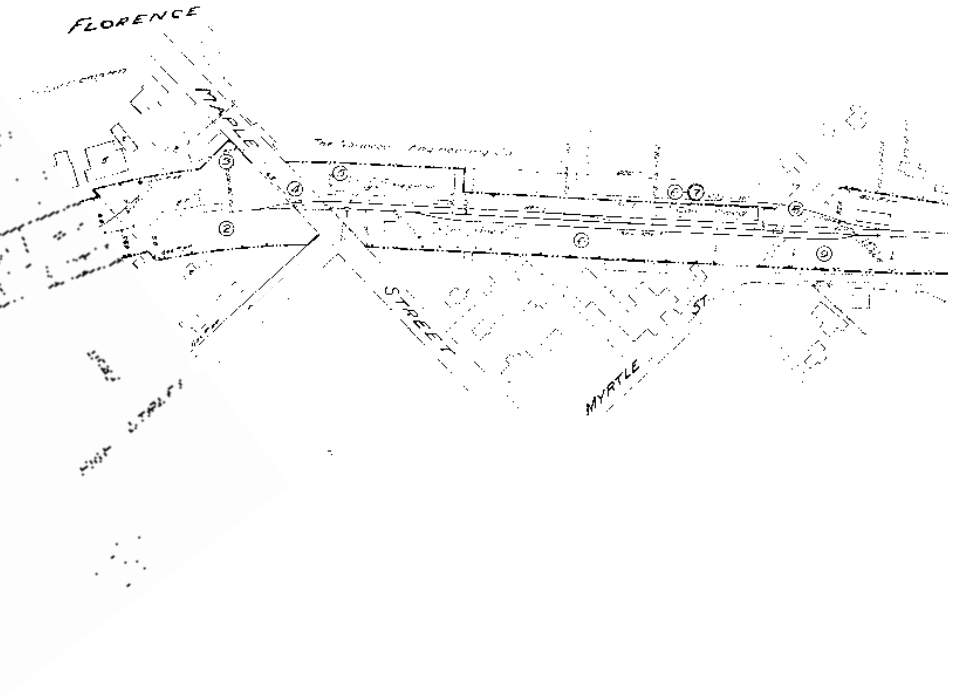
Below is the c 1918 valuation map of the New Haven Railroad



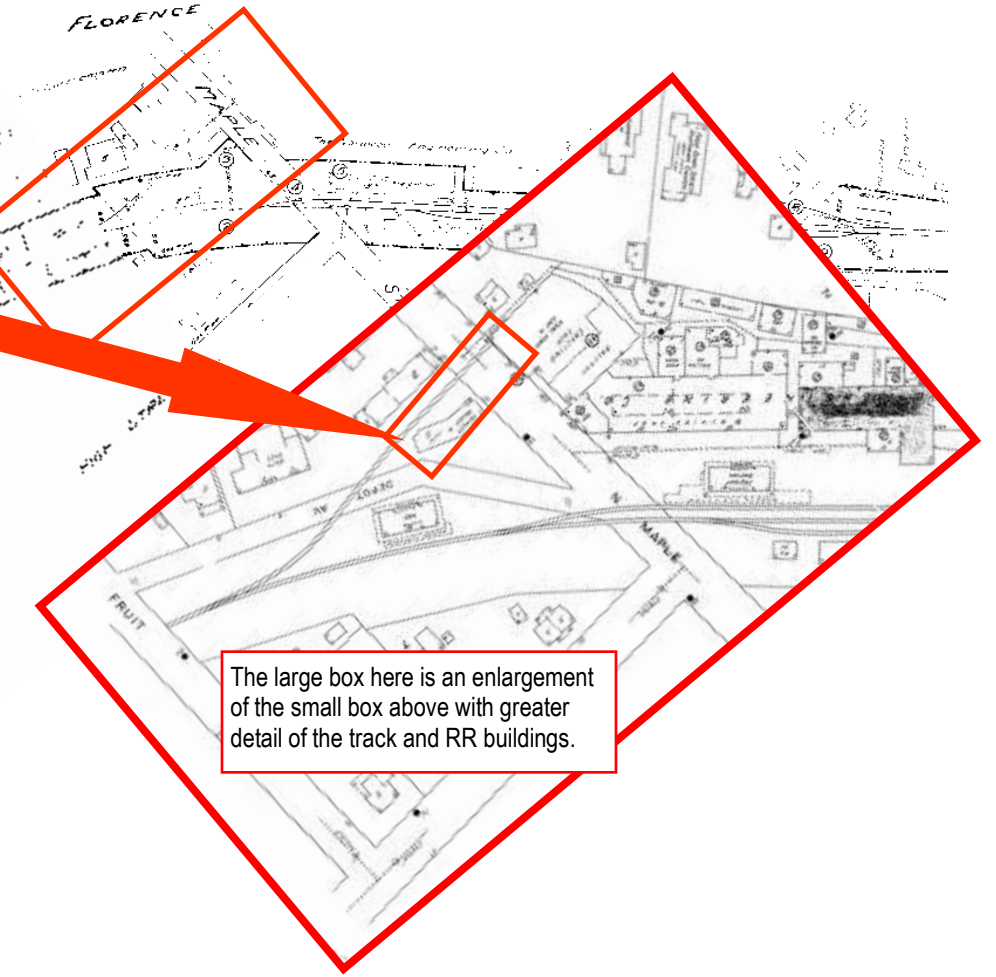
THE CURVED SPUR TRACK TO THE SEWING MACHINE FACTORY THAT IS ACROSS MAIN STREET—RT 9

PAGE 8-9

PARTS OF THE CURVED SPUR TRACK STILL SHOWS UP ON CONTEMPORARY MAPS. NOTE WILDER PLACE AND BRATTON COURT

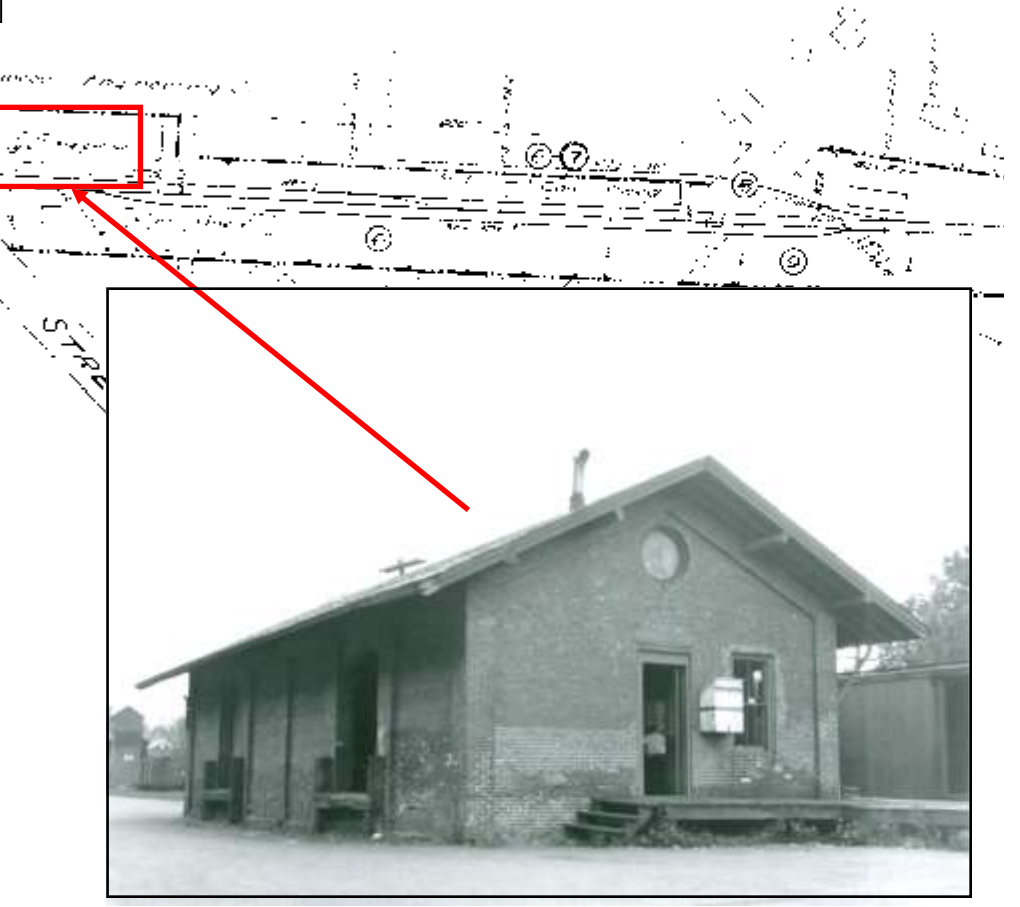


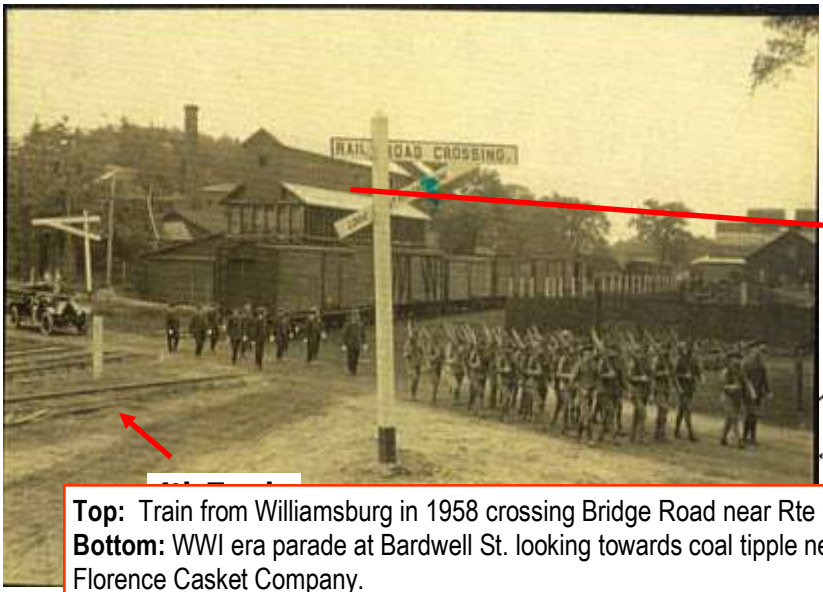
Note the building corner trimmed Back to allow the track to be close to the building here and across the steet into brick mill behind.



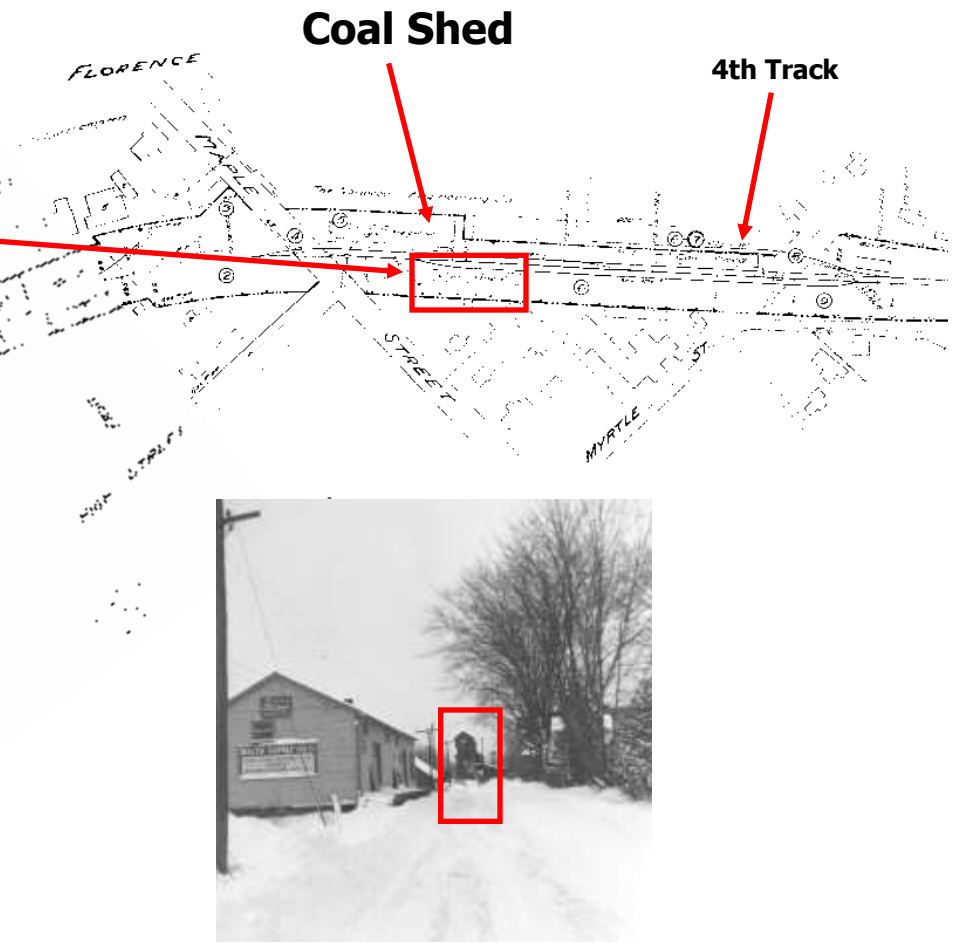
The large box here is an enlargement of the small box above with greater detail of the track and RR buildings.

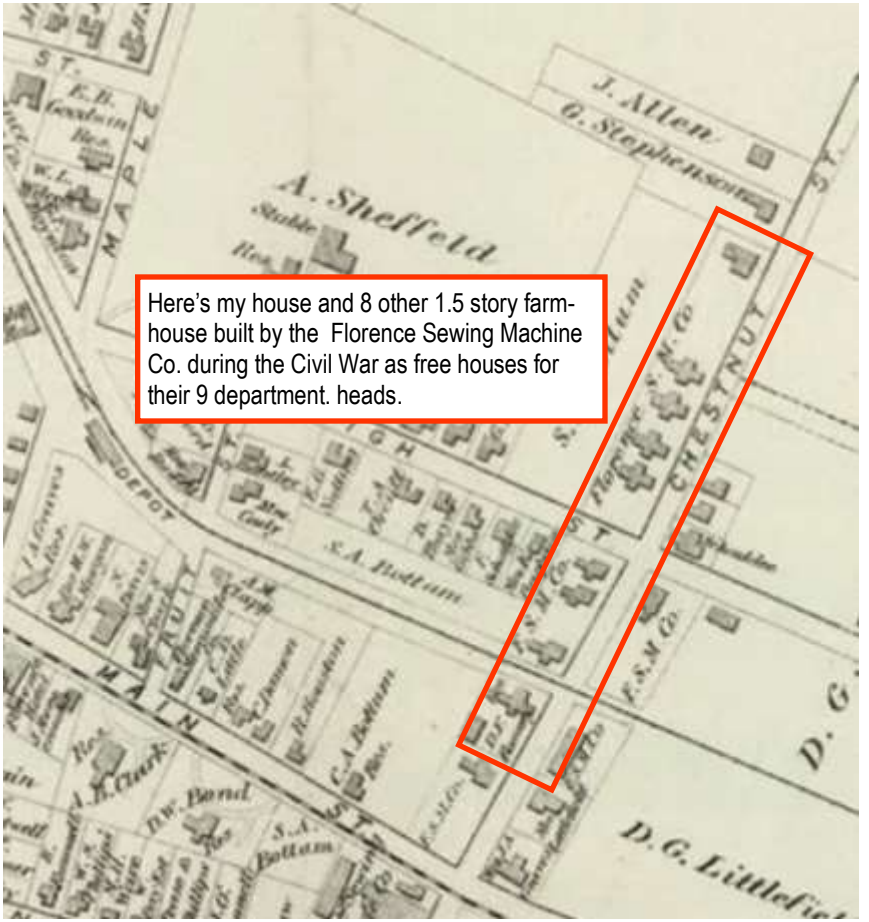
Top: Last passenger trip—a fan train trip—arranged by the Railroad Enthusiasts of Boston in early 1962.
Bottom: Circa early 1950s view of the Florence Freight house. Both photos from BOB'S PHOTOS.

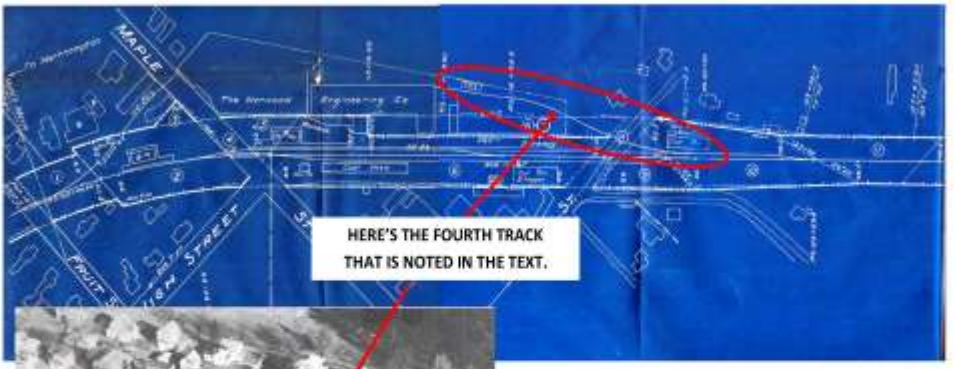




Top: Train from Williamsburg in 1958 crossing Bridge Road near Rte 9.
Bottom: WWI era parade at Bardwell St. looking towards coal tipple near Florence Casket Company.


Coal Shed
4th Track
FLORENCE
MAPLE
STREET
MYRTLE
ST.


Here's my house and 8 other 1.5 story farm-house built by the Florence Sewing Machine Co. during the Civil War as free houses for their 9 department. heads.
J. Allen
G. Stephenson
A. Sheffield
Stable
MAPLE
CHESTNUT
DEPOT
MAIN
S.A. Bottom
D.G. Littlefi



A SPUR TRACK WANTED BY A GROWING FACTORY

At a special meeting of the alderman Monday night the petition of the Norwood Engineering company for permission to lay a spur track across Myrtle St (*now called Bardwell St. CDP*) in Florence was received and it was voted, on the motion of Alderman Torpey, that a hearing be given on the petition on Thursday night. W.A. Stevenson, manager of the company and Lawyer Coolidge, attorney for the company, were present. Lawyer Coolidge said that under the statutes it was not necessary to give a fourteen days notice of a hearing and accordingly the date already named was fixed for a hearing. Manager Stevenson said he was going west Saturday to be gone some time and for that reason he was anxious that the hearing be held as soon as possible..

Lawyer Coolidge made a further statement that if the petition was granted by the aldermen that it would have to go before the county commissioners for approval and that a two weeks' notice before the board would meet all legal requirements.

This spur track would be used by W. H. Rice for his new coal sheds when they are completed. The Norwood company has been trying a number of years to secure the spur track, but there has been opposition to it by property owners. Mr. Rice recently bought some of this property for his coal sheds and approving of the petition of the Norwood it removes all objections to granting it by the aldermen. When this track is laid it will make four tracks on Myrtle Street, but as there is only one train a day on the Williamsburg branch, the crossing will not be very dangerous. If the petition is approved by the county commissioners it will then have to be submitted to the railroad commissioner for their approval.

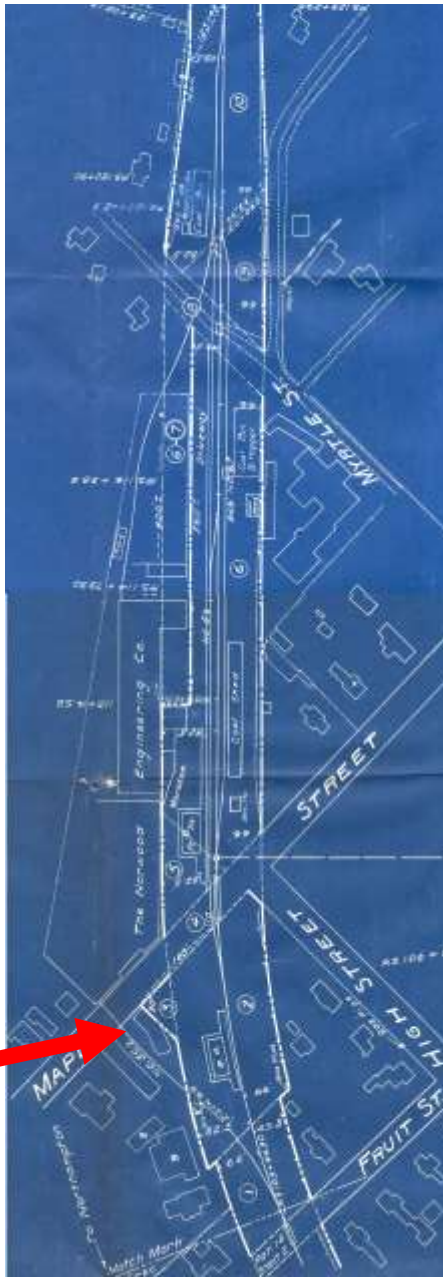
Lawyer Coolidge said that Mr. Stevenson would call around after the aldermen Thursday and take them in a new automobile to Florence for a view of the locality where a spur is wanted.

From the Daily Hampshire Gazette August 20, 1912. ['Lawyer' Coolidge later became President Calvin Coolidge]
From the collection of Craig P. Della Penna. You can see in the photos that the fourth track wanted by "Lawyer Coolidge became a reality on the Val Map of 1916 and the aerial view from the 1930s.

Top: Aerial view of the railroad and industrial infrastructure surrounding the Florence Casket Company circa 1930s.
Bottom: Shows the same neighborhood in the 1950s, though from a slightly different camera angle. Both photos courtesy of Russell Christenson and the Florence Casket Company.

The Stonehenge of Florence

Note the RR siding heading into the large doors



Two views of the old grain company located on North Maple St. **Top:** photo is from 1952 shows the railroad siding in the street. Left side of the photo is where Norwood Engineering (Artifacts) is located. **Bottom:** photo shows the building from the other direction in 1976. At that time the Florence Cleaners occupies the building. Note the construction of the Florence Paint Company building—and the still visible footings for the old Florence passenger station—torn down in 1965.

Top: Archival view of the Norwood Engineering Company—now Artifacts Cider Mill. Jason Clark collection.
Bottom left and right: Winter views of the RR corridor in the area of Florence Casket Company circa 1959. Russell Christenson collection.

NORWOTTUCK NETWORK

Mass Central Rail Trail

How the idea of the MASS CENTRAL RAIL TRAIL — as a 100 mile trail has progressed over the years.

Northampton, Hadley and Amherst comprise the Norwottuck Rail Trail segment of the MCRT. The corridor was bought by DCR in 1980 and after years of planning and development, it opened in 1993. Management and maintenance is handled by DCR.

Belchertown voted down the trail in 1997. A few years later, a local land trust was formed and then slowly, over time, most of the 9.5 miles was purchased and reassembled into a future trail. More recently, the land trust's holdings have now been donated to the town. The project is managed by the town's Cons-Com. A local Friends group is now active there too.

The Bondsville village of Palmer undeveloped section about 3 miles long. Efforts are beginning that will make it available to be built out a a trail.

East Quabbin Land Trust (EQLT) owns a lot of the corridor in Ware, Hardwick and New Braintree. They have opened about 6 miles of this section.

Barre, Rutland, Holden, and West Boylston and Sterling are communities of Wachusett Greenways (WG). A lot of this 30-mile section is owned by DCR's watershed protection agency. 17 miles of the WG segment are now open. Funding over the years has mostly been via Rec. Trail grants from DCR along with a large and energized volunteer component.

The town of Clinton recently purchased the old RR right-of-way, including a 1,000 foot tunnel. They partnered with the Clinton Greenway Conservation Trust. Together they are working on a plan to renovate the tunnel and make it a part of the trail.

The Wayside segment of the MCRT is comprised of Berlin, Hudson, Sudbury, Wayland, Weston, and Waltham. This will be a DCR-managed and maintained project. Only 2-3 years from completion now.

Belmont and Somerville are moving forward as individual projects at the community level.

Cambridge and Boston are mostly open now, as municipal projects.

MASS CENTRAL RAIL TRAIL DATA

BY THE NUMBERS

104	53±	91±	13±
Number of miles from Boston to Northampton	Number of miles open today	Number of miles owned by a protecting agency	Number of miles owned by a non-protecting entity

62 CHESTNUT STREET, FLORENCE, MA 01062 NNNETWORK.NET 413-575-2277 CraigDP413@Gmail.com

Donate to us through Network for Good.

A TIMELINE OF THE JOURNEY THUS FAR TO PIECE TOGETHER THE CORRIDOR

1980: The Mass. State Parks agency—then DEM, now DCR —purchases the western most 8.5 miles of the corridor and begins a 13 year process to plan and re-develop the corridor.

1988: The Fisk family completes a walk from Northampton Union Station to North Station Boston and they write a never-published manuscript. A copy of this was given to a top DEM official, who kept a copy in his office and referred to it often. He passed away a few years ago, but he knew it could be pieced together. https://tinyurl.com/MCRTFisk

1993: The Norwottuck Rail Trail opened. It was one of the last formal, paved, bikeways in the US to be built at the old design width of 8 feet. In 2015, the trail was widened to 10± feet in 2015.

1995: Wachusett Greenways (WG) was formed and they purposely decided to build out their sections as a soft surface—stone-dust trail, and not a paved trail. This was a momentous decision. Receiving small grants through the DCR grants process— that also encouraged a volunteer component—meant this would be built much faster. The other alternative, going through the transportation funding process looked much more complicated. They have completed 17 miles so far and have built or redone 10 bridges. Their service area includes 30 miles of the corridor that is largely owned by DCR's watershed protection agency.

1995: Both the six-community Wayside Rail Trail project and the Belchertown Rail Trail began to be talked about.

1997: Both Weston and Belchertown voted down their rail trail projects, with a smorgasbord of reasons, but one main reason in Belchertown was state's requirement to pave. At that time, Mass was the only state in the US to require pavement if you are using federal dollars. Local equestrians oppose paving and led the effort to fight against the trail.

1997: Wachusett Greenways (WG) opens their first mile of the MCRT in West Boylston.

1998: Commonwealth Mag. does a story about the fight in both Belchertown and Weston. https://tinyurl.com/CommonealthMagStory

1999: DCR released a vision report that called for more trail projects and encouraged of piecing together the MASS CENTRAL RAIL TRAIL corridor. https://tinyurl.com/GreenwayVision

1999: WG hosted the first "Golden Spike I" event, in West Boylston where Congressman Jim McGovern spoke enthusiastically to the vision for a statewide, E-W trail. https://tinyurl.com/GoldenSpike1

1999: The Federal Highway Administration encourages all states to hold a Millennium Trail Contest. Norwottuck Network (NN) was named the winning entry for Massachusetts. https://www.nnnetwork.net/about-us

2002: A 2nd event, Golden Spike II was held in Waltham at Bentley University, and over 400 advocates, gubernatorial candidates and policy makers turned out.

2004: An anti-trail group in Sudbury (Protect Sudbury) was founded to fight against both the N-S and the E-W trails. (N-S trail is the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail. E-W trail is the MCRT. Both in Sudbury)

2006: Shortly after the discovery of a theft of a short section of the former railroad corridor in Berlin, the MBTA offered up a lease to DCR—to lease the Wayside section.

2007: 3.2 miles of the corridor in Hardwick was purchased by the East Quabbin Land Trust (EQLT) to develop that section of the trail. This includes 3 rare bridges.

2011: After several years of negotiations, the MBTA and DCR entered into a lease agreement for the entire 24 mile Wayside section, including the eastern 2/3 of the corridor in Berlin. The western 1/3 in Berlin is still—in 2022— owned by the B&M RR.

2014: A report was released about the Erie Canal Trail showed that it produced $253+ million a year for the state of NY and communities along the way. https://tinyurl.com/ErieCanalReport

2017: Norwottuck Network (NN) launched a free, monthly E-newsletter about news along the MCRT, that quickly ramped up to over 10,000 subscribers in 8 states. And a little more than a year in, Constant Contact names it in the top 10% of all their E-newsletters world wide.

2017: Wachusett Greenways opens the 17th mile of their segment of the MCRT. https://tinyurl.com/WGMission

2017: The Belchertown Land Trust donates to the town, 5 miles of the MCRT increasing town owned sections to be nearly 7 of the 9.5 total miles. https://www.belchertowngreenway.org/by-the-numbers

2017: Friends of the Belchertown Greenway was formed. https://www.belchertowngreenway.org

2017: Because of the huge economic development numbers shown in the Erie Canal report, the NY Governor instructed NYDOT to build another 400 miles in 4 years.

2017: Wayland and Weston sections of Wayside Trail began construction because Eversource's utility upgrade made the trail construction by DCR easier/faster.

2018: EQLT purchases a farm in Ware that includes another mile of the MASS CENTRAL RAIL TRAIL corridor and begins to develop it.

2018: The 7th Golden Spike event was held in Northampton. https://www.gs2018.org/

2019: NN was re-launched with a broader mission and a more geographically encompassing board.

2019: Weston and Wayland segments of the Wayside section open. Eversource's grid enhancement project makes it easier and less expensive for DCR to build the trail.

2020: Protect Sudbury fights the Eversource plan in Sudbury to build a more resilient and robust grid by putting it underground, under the future trail.

2020: NY completes the Empire State Trail. 750 miles total. https://empiretrail.ny.gov/

2020: The Town of Clinton along with the Clinton Greenway Conservation Trust purchased the 1,000 foot tunnel and a remaining mile or so of dead corridor still owned by the B&M RR. https://tinyurl.com/TunnelClinton

2020: MassDOT commissions a feasibility study of the MCRT and hires VHB, a consulting firm, to identify the missing pieces and come up with a plan to develop work-arounds until the expensive missing pieces can be filled-in.

2021: The VHB study is finalized and released. https://tinyurl.com/MCRT-Study

2021: Protect Sudbury loses at the SJC. https://tinyurl.com/SJC-ruling

2022: Protect Sudbury loses at the Surface Transportation Board in Washington DC. https://tinyurl.com/STB-ruling

2022: EQLT enters into a lease agreement with National Grid for another 2.3 miles of the MCRT corridor in the Hardwick village of Gilbertville.

2022: Golden Spike III 2022 is to be held in Gilbertville on 7-30-22. https://www.gs2022.org/

April 2022: Norwottuck Network sends out a RFP to develop a report to show just what the economic impact of completing the trail would mean for the state and the communities.

Some more archival stories from the collection

nce Chugs Back To Roundhouse

branch was still used to provide hospital
al service to the Veterans When the hospital started getting all shipments by truck, however, the line was cut back to Florence.

Now the Easthampton Florence line is being discontinued for much the same reason.

Large organizations and firms on the west side of Northampton such as Northampton Gas and Light, Northampton State Hospital, Florence Casket Co. and Smith College, could be most affected by the discontinuation it was noted.

Rail service to the east side of town will still be provided by the Boston and Maine Railroad however.

Canadian Pacific

The end of an era takes place as workmen from Hampshire Lumber Co. in Northampton unload the last railroad car to travel the Easthampton-Florence branch line of the New Haven-Penn Central Railroad. The line is now closed, and the tracks will eventually be torn up.

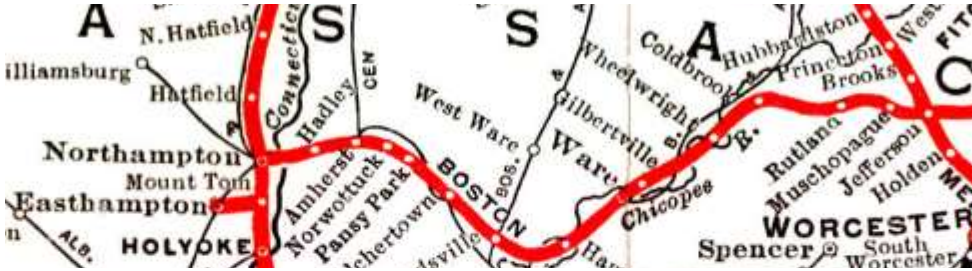
Florence

Top: Daily Hampshire Gazette story noting the last rail car in Florence.
Bottom: Looking west in the village of Leeds circa 1880. From the 4th floor 'turret' of the former mansion of the mill owner—now condo just up the hill.

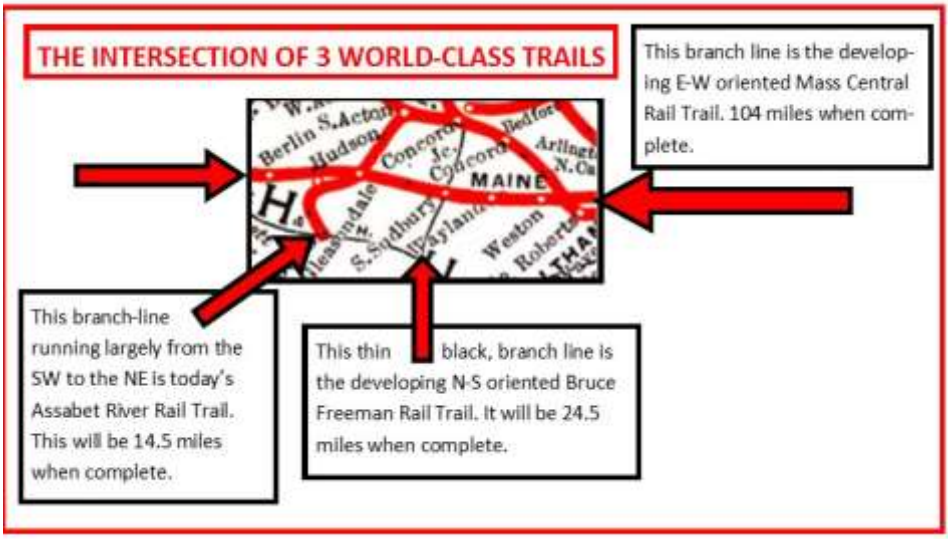
Train-Riding Society Misses Boat 2-1962

The end of the line came a quarter of a mile too soon when an excursion train chartered by the Connecticut Valley Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society was derailed by ice Sunday at the Kellogg Rd. crossing in Williamsburg. The derailment frustrated the main goal of the society—a chance to travel the full length of the soon-to-be-abandoned Florence-Williamsburg line.

Two views from 1962. **Top:** Daily Hampshire Gazette article of a derailment in Williamsburg of a tourist train.
Bottom: Last train from Williamsburg later in the year.



Above is a map of the former Mass Central Branch of the B&M Railroad. Today it is being developed as a trail that will connect Boston to Northampton. 104 miles. For maps, updates, etc. go to: www.masscentralrailtrail.org. Other info at www.nnnetwork.net . To subscribe to a free eNewsletter about this developing network, drop me an email: CraigDP413@gmail.com



Top: Williamsburg's passenger railroad station. [spelled with an 'h' in this case.] The structure still in place—now a part of the Lashway Logging complex on Rte 9. There were over 20 stations on this line back into CT that looked just like this.
Middle and Bottom: Differing views of the tallest railroad bridge in New England. This was located at the confluence of the South and the Deerfield Rivers. More info about this old New Haven RR line at this site:
https://tinyurl.com/ybdqppt3

Southern New England... BLUE BOOK OF AMERICAN INDUSTRY

GET out your directory of manufacturers... check with any credit rating service . . . and you'll discover more leading industries with headquarters — or branches — in Southern New England than in any other part of the country.

These manufacturers did not pick Southern New England by chance. They chose Southern New England because it was the most highly-industrialized area in the whole United States . . . and always has been.

From the outset, industry here has thrived in an atmosphere of inventiveness, progress and opportunity. New manufacturers have always been welcomed, established industries encouraged to expand. Realizing long ago that their existence depended largely on maintenance of healthy industrial conditions — state governments, municipalities and community leaders have always cooperated to smooth the way for incoming industry.

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Inside a radius of 500 miles from the center of Southern New England are 58,000,000 people to use Southern New England's consumer goods and her vast output of producer commodities . . . the parts and tools upon which other industries depend to keep going.

And through her great seaports, Southern New England is only a step away from tidewater and easy access to the foreign markets that will develop now that the world is again at peace.

If your plans are still in a state of flux, think hard about Southern New England . . . a great place to promote your new or expanding business . . . and a great place to live and play, too.

* * *

A full-color booklet is yours for the asking: *"Southern New England For Tomorrow's Industry"*. Get your copy by writing to P. E. Benjamin, Manager of Industrial Development, The New Haven Railroad, 80 Federal Street, Boston 10, Mass.

This is one of a series of advertisements presenting the industrial advantages of Southern New England.

THE NEW HAVEN R.R.

Serving **SOUTHERN NEW ENGLAND** *with a network of rail and highway transportation that puts every manufacturer* "ON THE MAIN LINE".

This is a page from the old Industrial Development Department of the New Haven RR's marketing brochure. It shows many of the companies in western and central Mass that were served by the NH RR. [Most of these old line are now becoming trails.] From the collection of Craig Della Penna