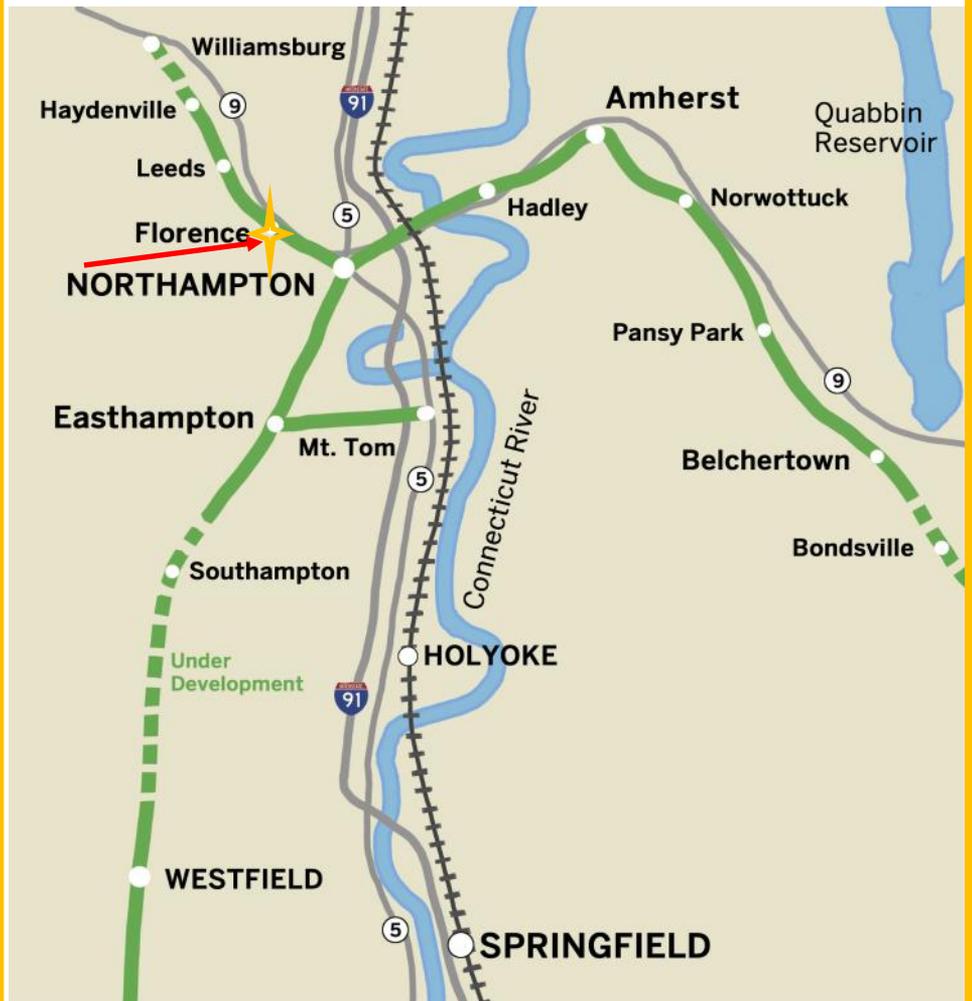


A **WALKING** tour of the *HISTORY*
and *VISIBLE ARCHAEOLOGY*
of the *former WILLIAMSBURG BRANCH*
of the *NEW HAVEN RAILROAD*
right in *FLORENCE VILLAGE CENTER*



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: 1982



Circa early 1960s view of the Florence Passenger Station looking toward the old Norwood Engineering Company. The station was torn down in 1969. Photo from BOB'S PHOTOS.

A Short Bio of Craig Della Penna

Craig has a small consulting firm, Northeast Greenway



Solutions which he uses to assist communities thinking of developing a rail trail. He helps get the community to 'yes'.

If you can't get the community to be in support of the trail conversion idea, you can't build a trail. He's helps get the community to "YES" and has been doing that for over 25 years now. He has helped build over 1,000 miles of trails in New England and NY.

He has written 3 books on this topic and has given over 1,200 lectures in 21 states on various topics related to these conversion into trails. Some of the topics include, economic impact, place-making, real estate impacts.

In the past few years, 5 books have been written that feature him in them as a case study in various realms. Including two about his innovative real estate practice.

He is the first Realtor in the U.S. to develop a special niche real estate practice of selling properties near to rail trails or greenways. And he's been featured in several national and regional real estate trade magazines.



And best of all, he and his wife Kathleen also operate a bed & breakfast in a nicely restored

house that sits 8 feet from the rail trail in Northampton's historic Civil War-era, industrial village of Florence. <https://www.sugar-maple-inn.com/>

And later in the summer of 2025, he is standing up a national podcast called **Roads Less Travelled** which will be about the three realms above.

1879 Birds Eye view of Florence, MA

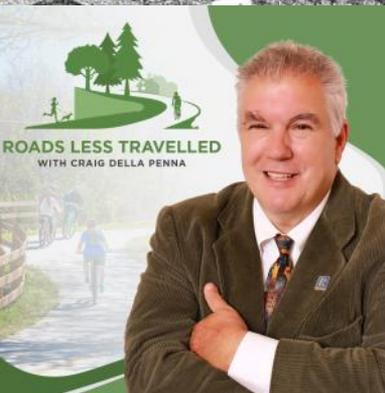
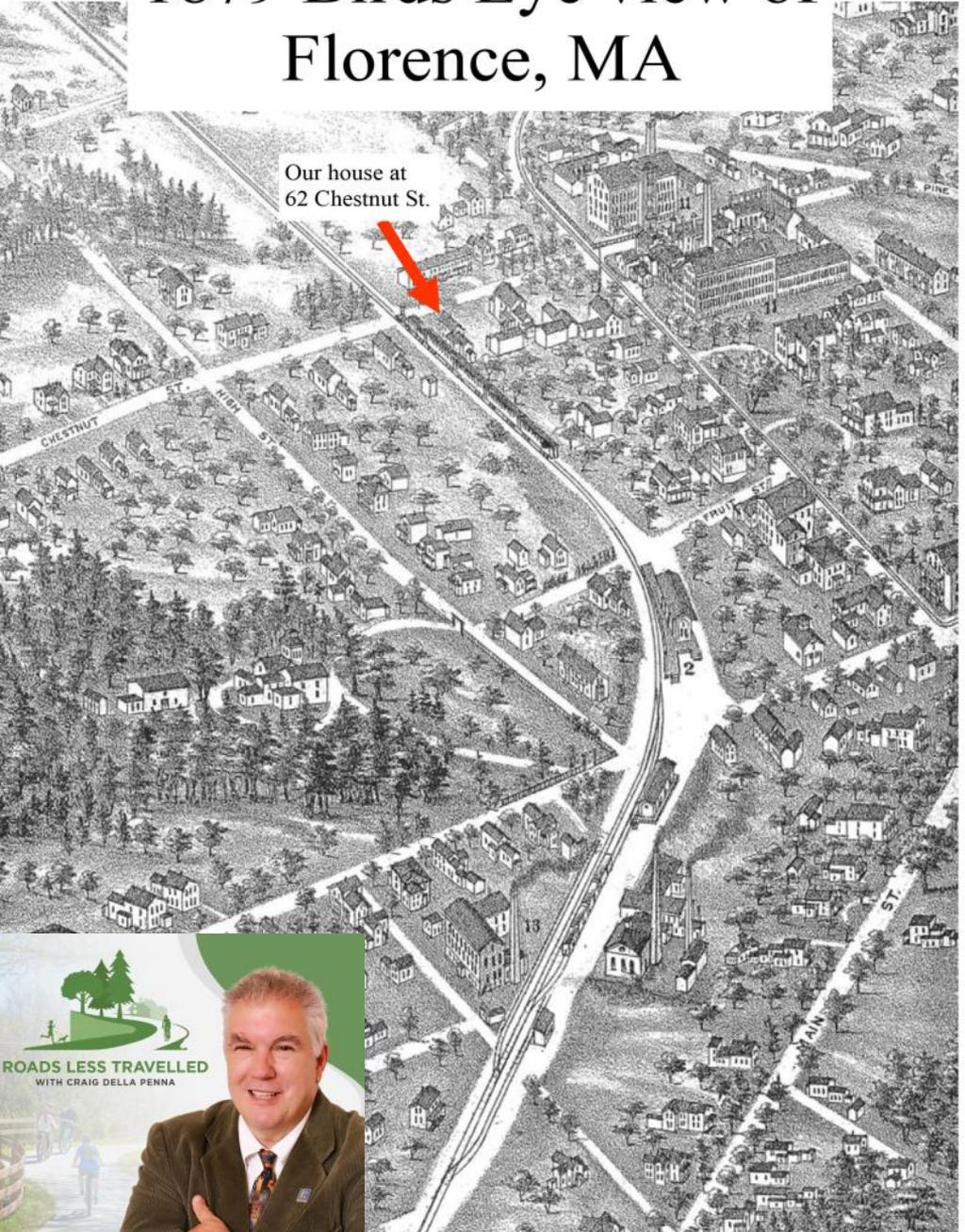
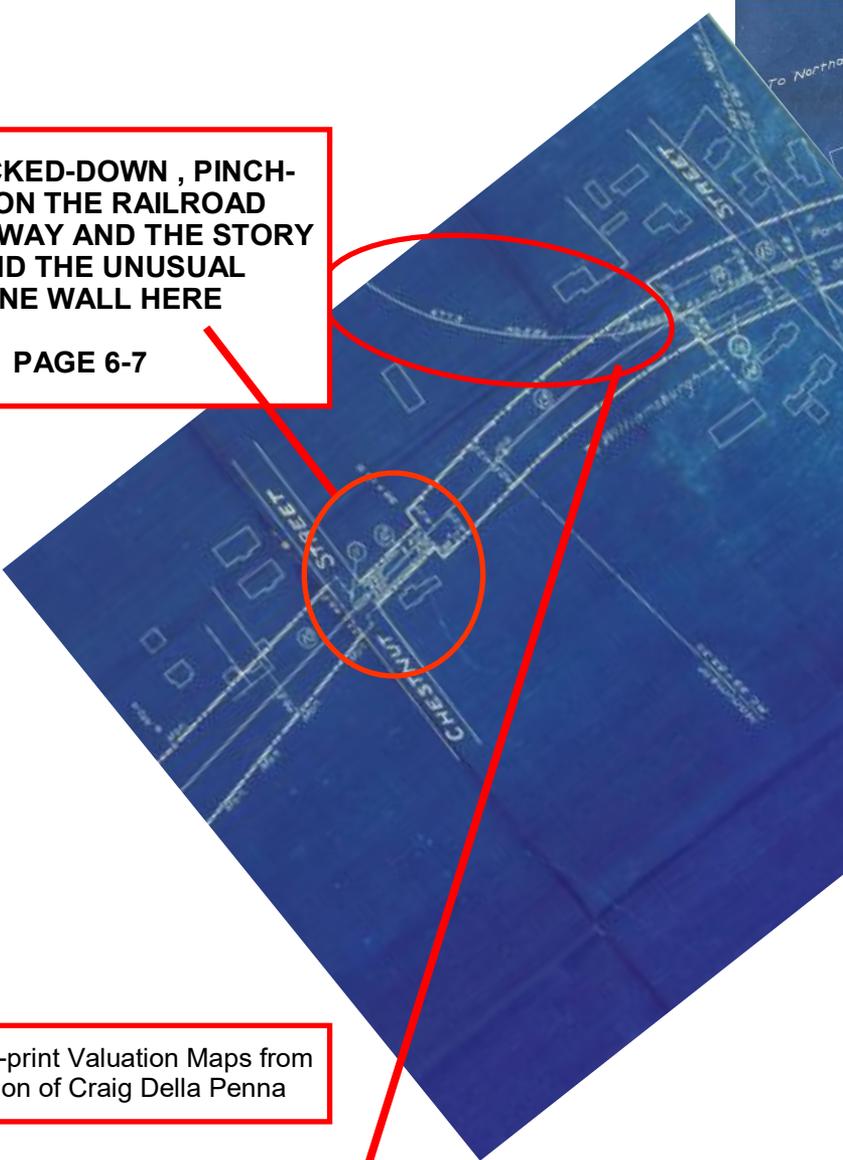


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THE NECKED-DOWN , PINCH-POINT ON THE RAILROAD RIGHT OF WAY AND THE STORY BEHIND THE UNUSUAL STONE WALL HERE

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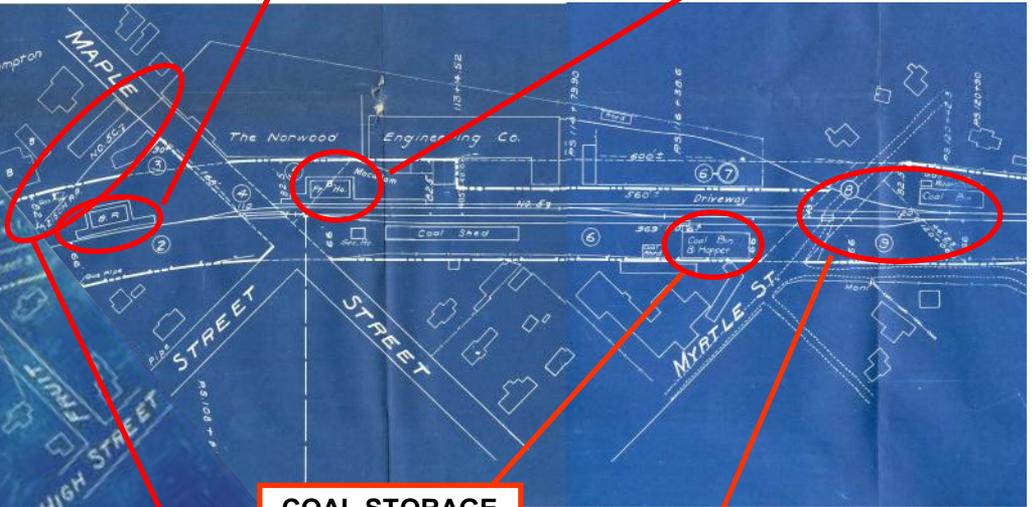


Original blue-print Valuation Maps from the collection of Craig Della Penna

THE CURVED SPUR TRACK TO THE SEWING MACHINE FACTORY

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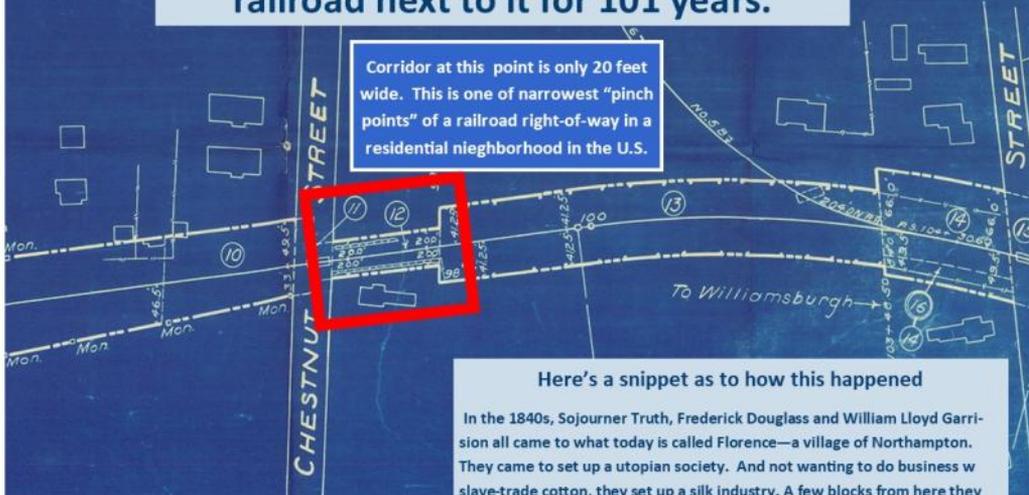
**THE SPUR TRACK INTO THE OLD
NORWOOD ENGINEERING BUILDING
NOW OWNED BY SALMON STUDIOS.**

**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 neighborhood 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_ceVsdD17M

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



THE NE

AND HARTFORD R.R.

60

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.

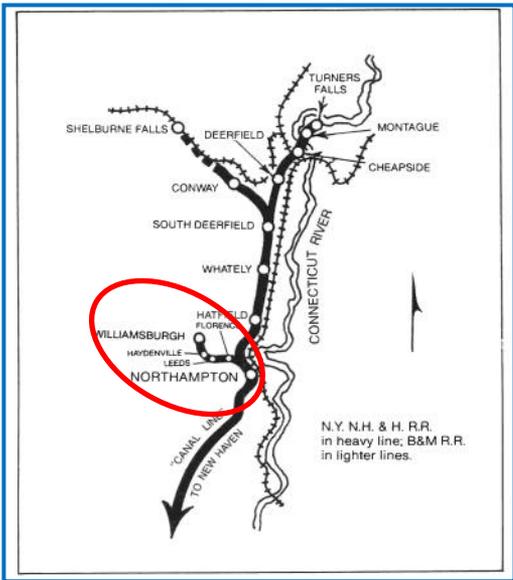
The right-of way was acquired by the railroad in 1866 and it was built and open by 1868.

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.

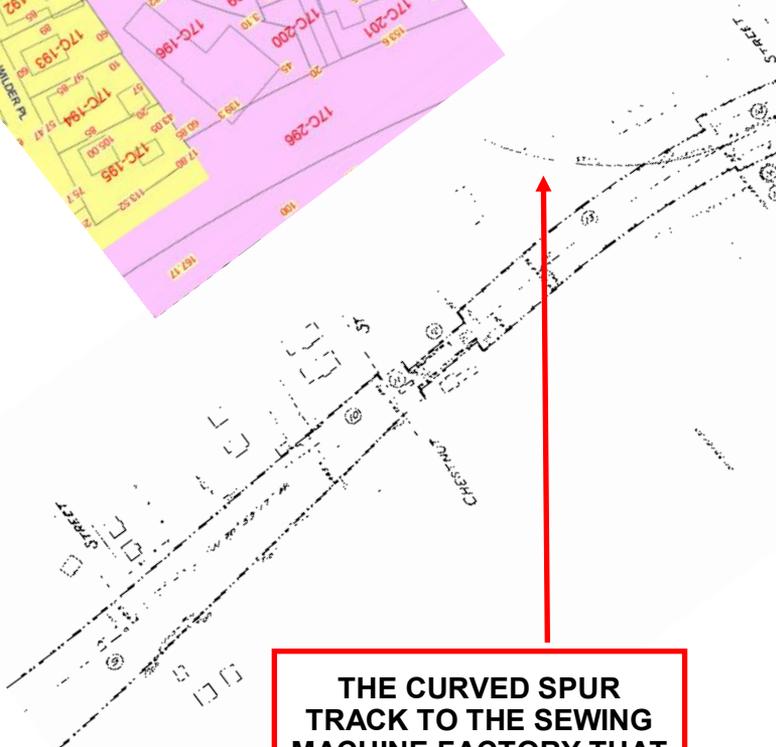
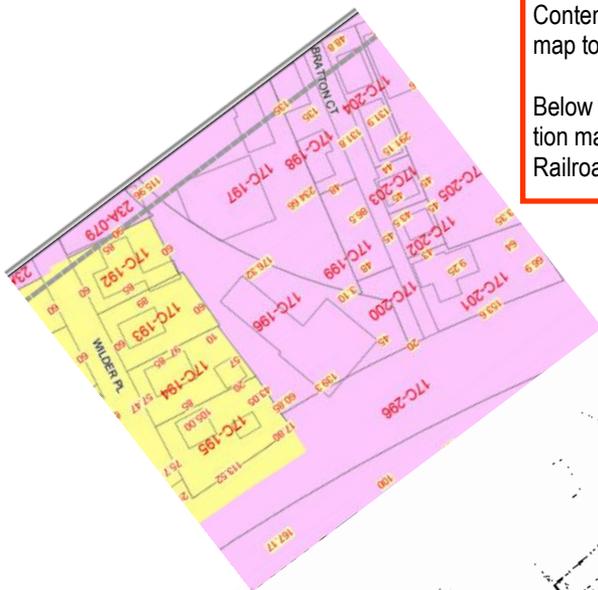
In order to maintain this grade, the railroad cut down the land of Chestnut St by about 2 feet and built the stone walls on both sides of the railroad corridor and in front of both of these houses on the Chestnut St side too.

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.

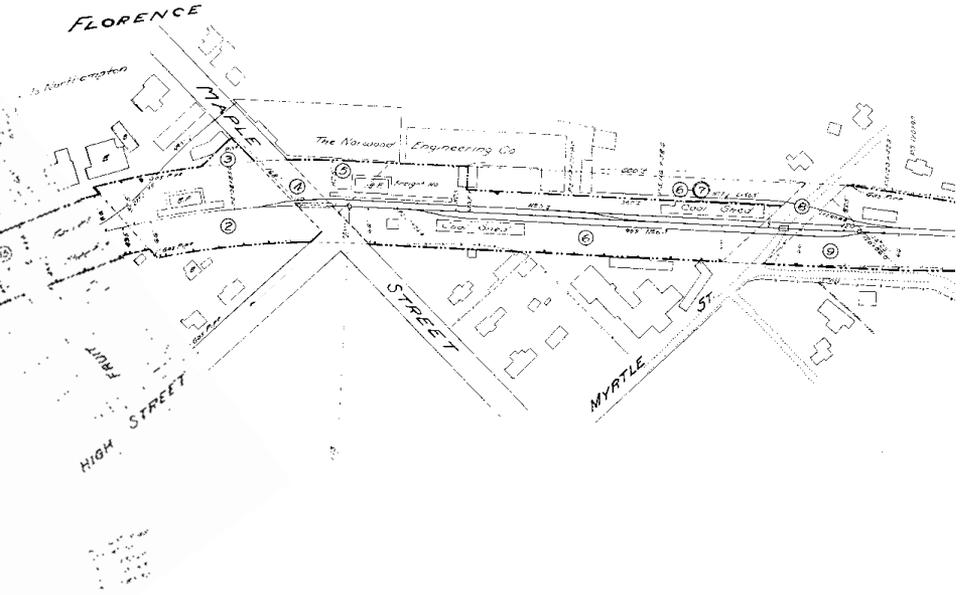
Below is the c 1918 valuation map of the New Haven Railroad



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

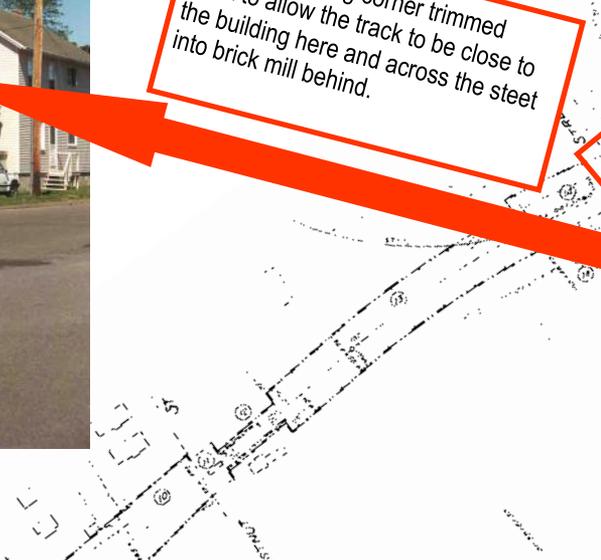
PAGE 8-9

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



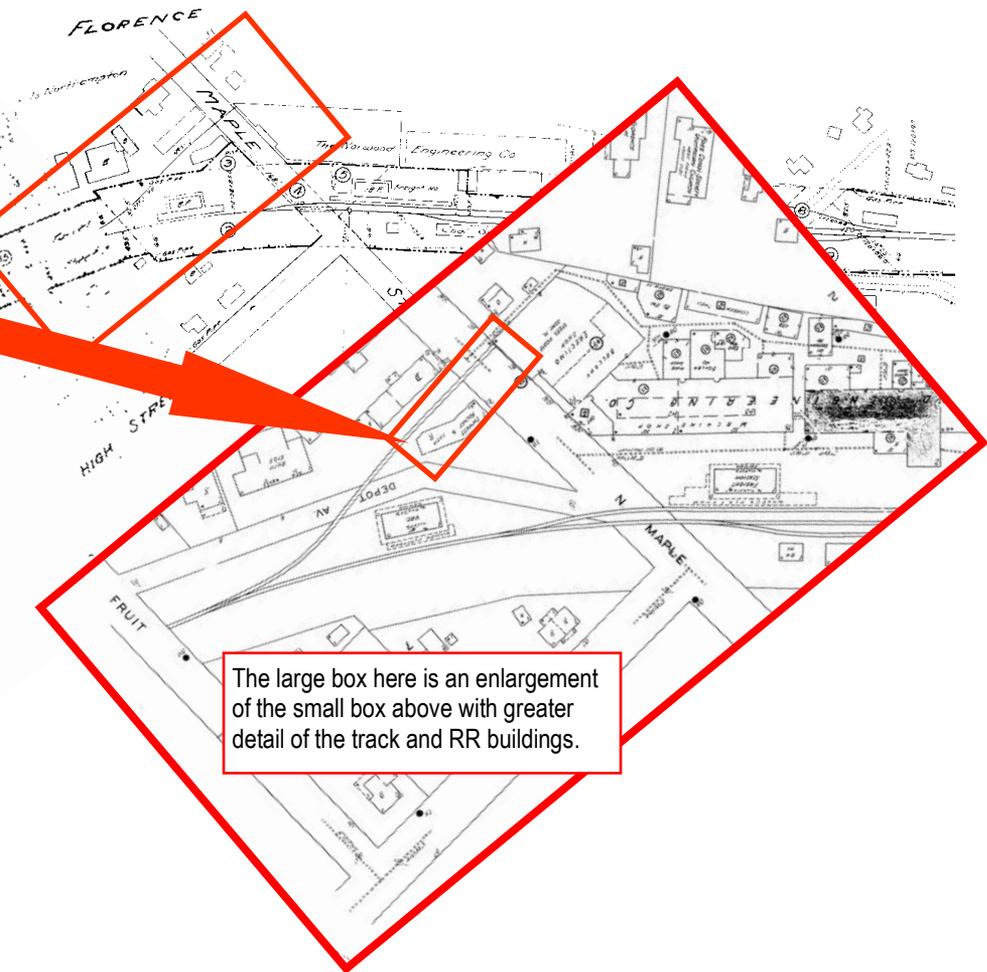


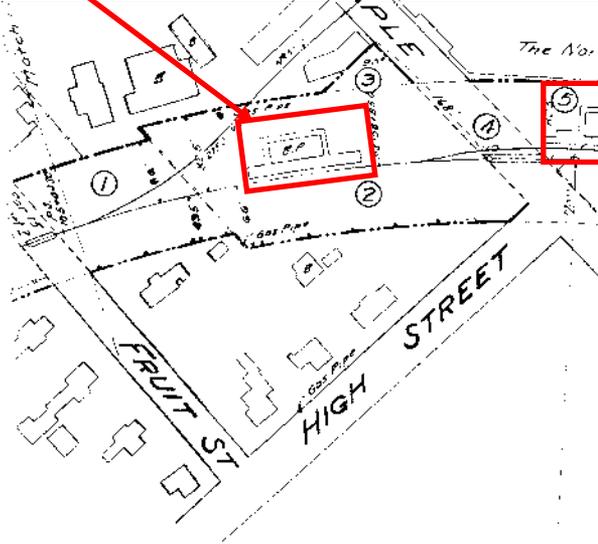
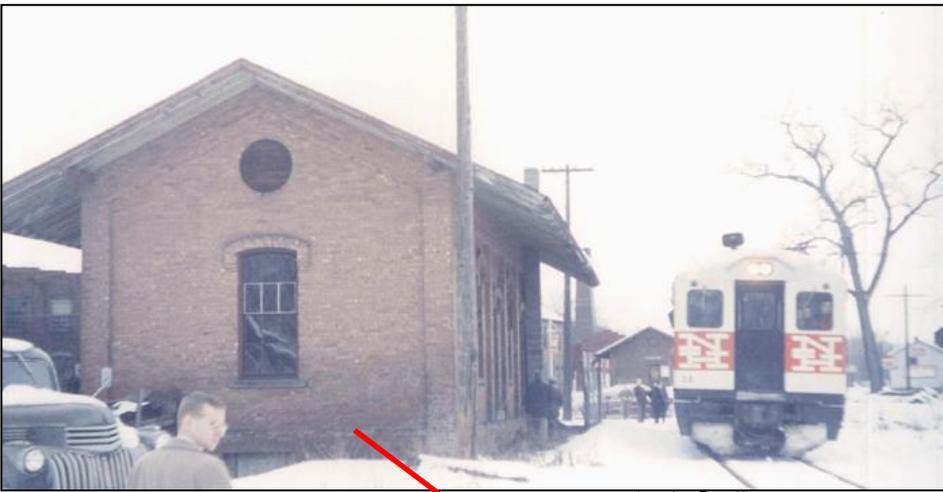
Note the building corner trimmed Back to allow the track to be close to the building here and across the street into brick mill behind.



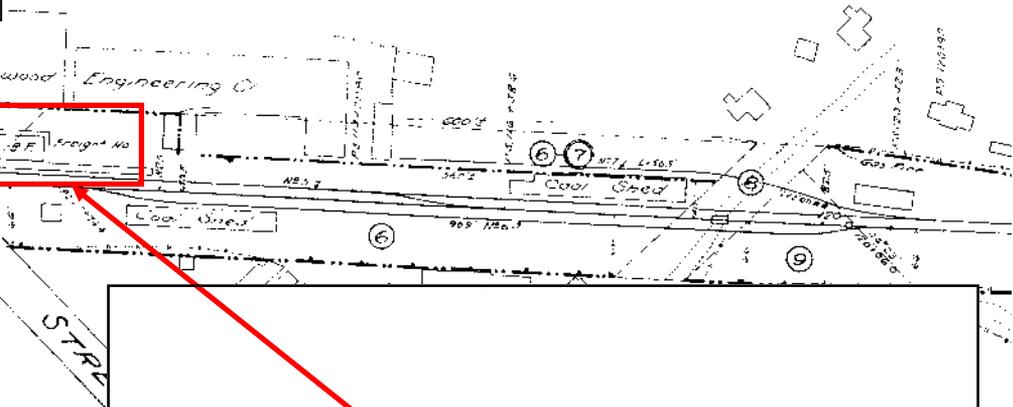
29 N. MAPLE

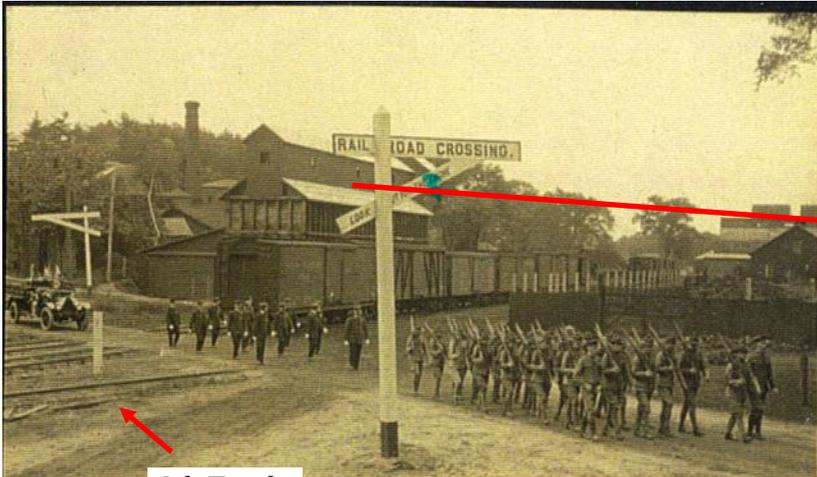
GAZETTE 01-29-52





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.





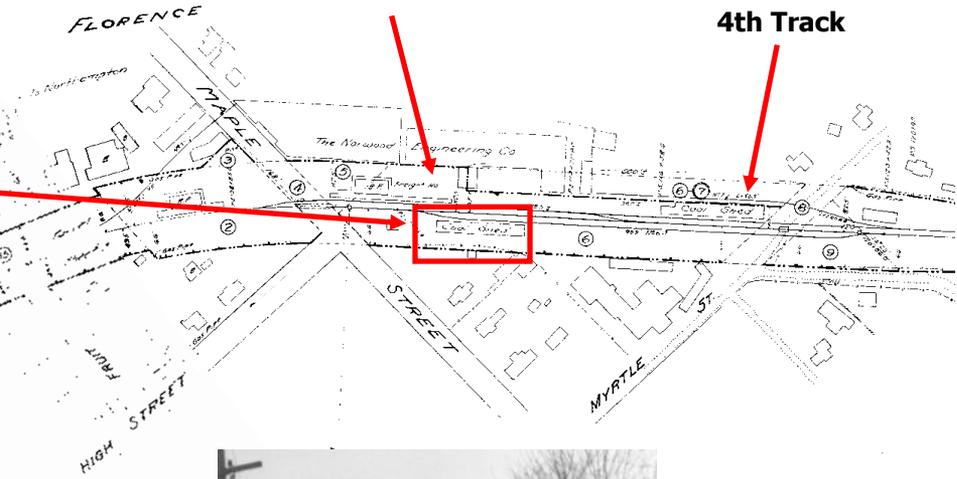
Top: Train from Williamsburg in 1958 crossing Bridge Road near Rte 9.
Bottom: WWI era parade at Bardwell St. looking towards coal tipple near Florence Casket Company.

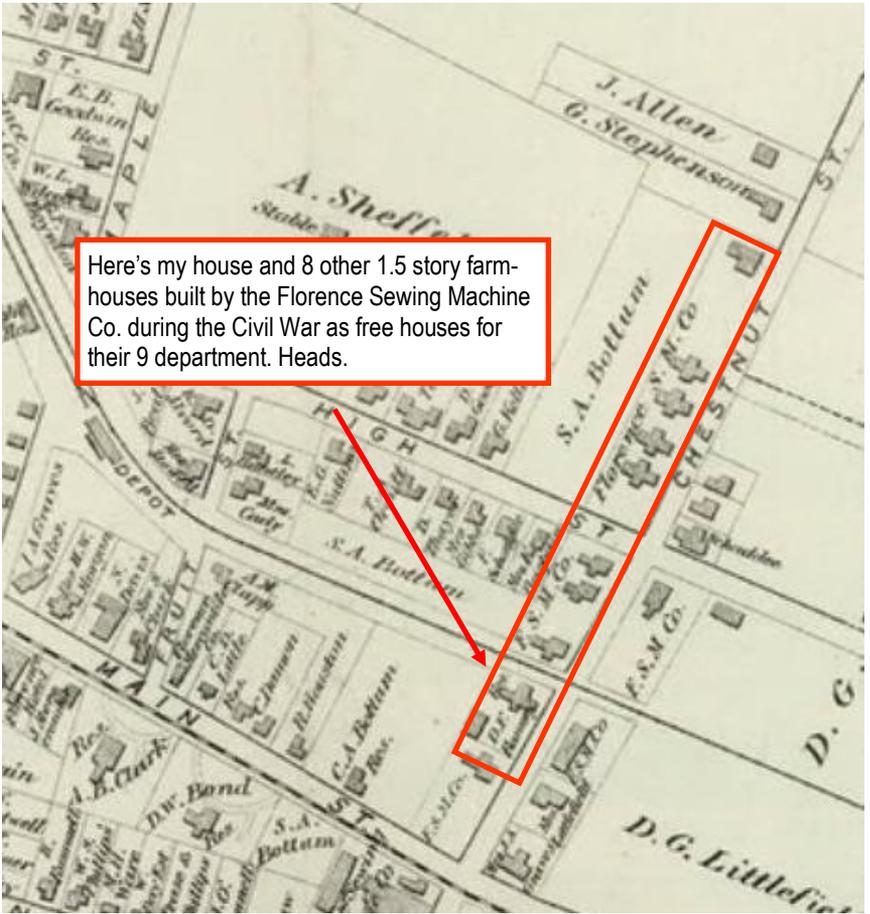


Footing and floor
of the Coal shed

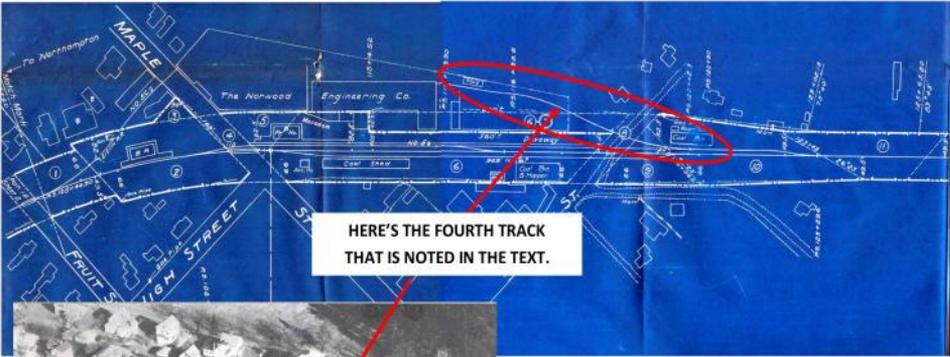
Coal Shed

4th Track

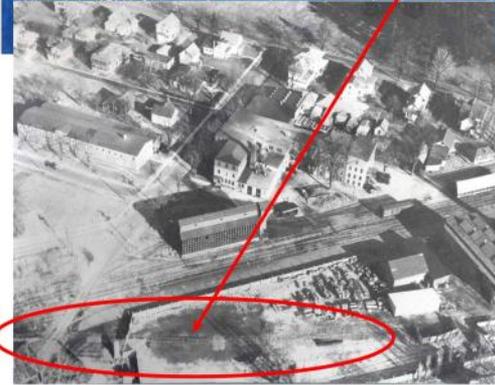




Here's my house and 8 other 1.5 story farm-houses built by the Florence Sewing Machine Co. during the Civil War as free houses for their 9 department. Heads.



HERE'S THE FOURTH TRACK
THAT IS NOTED IN THE TEXT.



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.

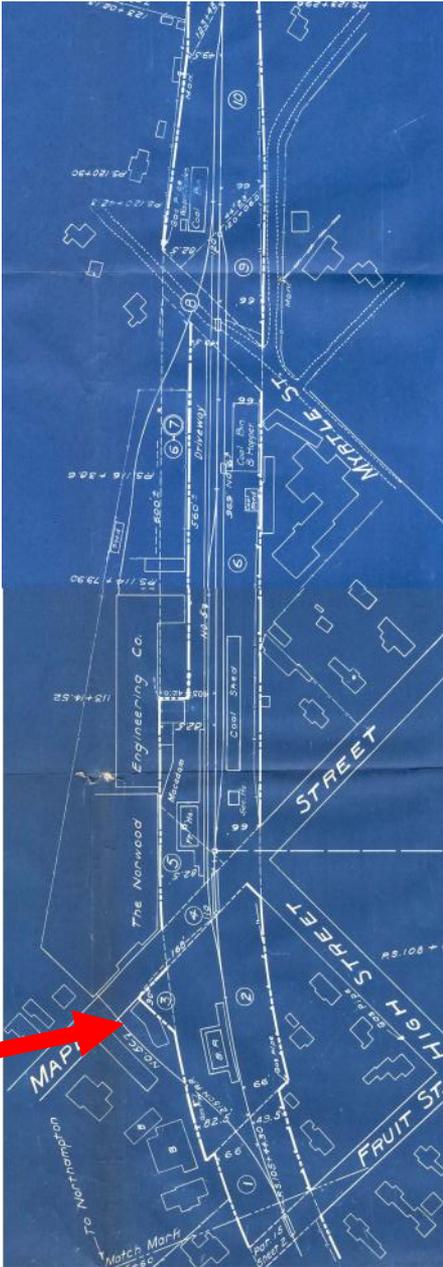
Bottom: Shows the same neighborhood in the 1950s, though from a slightly different camera angle. Both photos courtesy of Russell Christenson and the Florence Casket Company.



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.



Some more archival stories from the collection

nce Chugs Back To Roundhouse

branch was still used to provide Hospital. getting oil shipments by truck, Florence.
 oil service to the Veterans. When the hospital started 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.

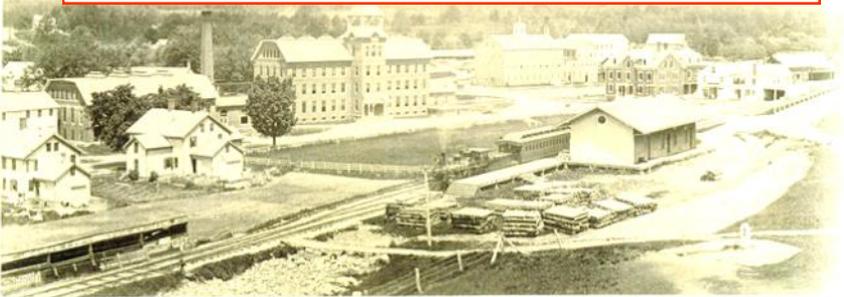
Rail service to the east side of town will still be provided by the Boston and Maine Railroad however, &



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. Both from the collection of Craig Della Penna



Train-Riding Society Misses Boat 2-19-62



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. Both from the collection of Craig Della Penna





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.

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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.

Also, never forget that Southern New England is in the heart of the great mass of America's consuming public.

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 Railroad'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 lines are now becoming trails.] From the collection of Craig Della Penna