

How we discovered it

Starting in the mid to late 1990s, I started doing a series of lectures in communities that were debating the idea of converting a former railroad corridor into a linear park, a rail trail.

Back then, in many places, this was a very controversial idea. Pitched battles/debates ensued in many places. In more than a few places, the idea was so controversial that families and neighbors were divided. Still to this day in some places.

Back in the early days, I was doing this work on my own. Training pro-trail forces how not to lose, meeting w folks opposed, trying to keep a lid on things. Later I was hired by Rails-to-Trails Conservancy with a couple of distinct missions. Do the lectures, train the pro-trail folks, keep them in the game, raise the level of membership, meet, engage, and inspire major donors.



The house was badly run down and greenery was taking over.

I was doing 900 miles a week. Sometimes 4-5 lectures a week. All because I wrote a book about rail trails in New England and was doing the beginnings of a book about New York's Rail Trails. Back in the mid-90s I had been on about 120 rail trails and never saw one that wasn't loved. I couldn't fathom why people were opposed.

I would go in and when doing a lecture for the general public at large, I'd always get hit with a shotgun blast of reasons why their community shouldn't or couldn't convert the dead railroad into a linear park. And they'd invariably end up with; *"besides, you don't live near one, so don't tell us what to do."*

While returning from a lecture in New Hampshire one dark April night in 2001, A lecture where I was particularly beaten up by the antis. I decided to stop off the highway in Northampton and check to see if there were any old houses for sale near the rail trail that passes through town.

I stumbled upon an old house that had just come on the market and it sat right next to the trail in the Florence neighborhood. Eight (8) feet from the trail.

Florence is a genuine, intact Civil War era industrial village. The railroad stopped running in 1969 and after several years of community discussions, it was repurposed as a trail in 1982.

Interestingly, though it was badly run-down, it had amazing potential. In addition to proximity to the trail, a village center location was also key for us. When we lived in Agawam, that was a place where you had to drive everywhere. Single-use zoning meant a lack of sidewalks and no opportunity to walk to a store or restaurants or basic services.

The next morning, Kathy and I called the Realtor and made arrangements to tour the house. In the light of day, we saw that it was even more run-down than we thought, but it also had even more potential than I originally foresaw. We put in an offer right away, finding out that three other families had put in bids as well. It turns out that our offer won because we allowed for the previous owner to stay in place until September.

We then proceeded to sell our house in Agawam and plan for the restoration of 62 Chestnut Street. In our planning, we knew that we would not really have a pressing need for the upstairs bedrooms, so we decided to set up the bed & breakfast we always wanted to do, utilizing that space.

After we finished the 14 month renovation, we opened as Sugar Maple Trailside Inn. Then I'd go into the pressure packed meetings, I'd say; *"I hear your fear, but I live 8 feet from one of the earliest municipally built rail trails in southern New England."* *"In fact, we operate a B&B there and if you are really fearful of this coming to your neighborhood, we'll give you a complementary week-night stay."* *"Week night only because we want you to wake up to the laughter of kids biking to school. "And by the way, how many kids bike to school in your town."*

