

LIVING LIFE DIRECTLY NEXT TO A RAIL TRAIL

By Craig Della Penna

We live on Chestnut Street in Northampton's historic Civil War industrial village center of Florence. Our house sits eight feet from the trail and we have a front row seat as to what is happening there. Each day begins with pretty much the same scenario.

Starting at around 5:30 a.m., or the crack of dawn, joggers and power-walkers pass by. By 7:30 a.m., the dog walkers are out and our Scottish Terrier-ist, Thelma has about 20 dog friends she interacts with weekly. By 8:00 a.m., school kids pass by. In fact, scores of kids. Most are walking, but a substantial number are on bikes and even a smattering on roller blades. So many kids here walk/bike/blade to school that I would hazard a guess and say two school buses aren't needed because of this safe route to school.

Around 8:30 a.m., a number of utilitarian bikers ride by—people biking to work. At midday, the users are mostly retirees and parents pushing baby carriages. The dog walkers are back out late in the afternoon. Finally, the evening strollers, joggers, and walkers pass by.

To call these facilities "bike paths" is a misnomer, as there are too many walkers and joggers. In fact, to call them "recreation trails" is a misnomer as well, as they are true transportation facilities. The city has come around to this realization as well because several years ago, they began plowing the trail in the winter so it can be relied upon as a "Safe Route to School." This transition from thinking the path as purely a rec use, to one that has a sizable transportation or utilitarian component takes a long time. Usually a generation. That transition has taken place there.

On weekends, the complexion of the path changes. There are more bicyclists, who tend to be tourists, but the local joggers, power-walkers, strollers, and dog walkers are still out there in force. Being only 8 feet away, our house was one of the closest houses ever to have a railroad built next to it and, conversely, it is certainly one of the closest houses to sit next to a rail trail.

In fact, our house was built in 1865—before the railroad was thought of. In 1868, when the railroad was being planned, the railroad officials stepped up and offered up a creative solution to the coming train damaging the house. They reinforced all the plaster ceilings with lath strips nailed up from below. Since that wasn't attractive, they then hung taut, but flexible canvas a few inches below the reinforced plaster ceiling. The reinforced ceilings have held, and the canvas ceilings were able to flex.

The trains went away in 1969, and the trail was proposed in the mid-70s and after extensive discussions, it was built and opened in 1983. Now, we've been here only since 2001, and don't have a memory of the discussions about developing, or not developing, the trail, but with only bikes and peds going by today, I can attest that the house doesn't shake anymore. We operate a bed & breakfast here and have a little show-and-tell our guests each morning, about the last remaining canvas ceiling, which is in the dining room.