



Mass Central Rail Trail

PEOPLE ARE ACTUALLY OPPOSED TO A TRAIL? REALLY?

On Saturday, June 29th, we had an interesting experience. Early this spring Kathy and I agreed to be a part of a 6-home tour of places in Northampton that all had won a Historic Preservation Award from the city, sometime in the past. The interesting twist is that this tour took-in the inside of the houses as well as the outside. This was a first for Northampton where the owners of award-winning houses opened their houses to the general public.

Here's how it all came to be. Earlier in the spring, I was approached by one of the Friends of Cooley Dickinson—the local hospital. They were envisioning a historic home tour—that included tours of the inside of the houses. They were envisioning a partnership of sorts where the Friends of CDH would co-sponsor with the Northampton Historical Commission. (Full disclosure, I am a member of the NHC). I was the NHC liaison to the project and designed the ticket and the brochure.

On the day of the event, though I had a “docent” from the Friends of CDH, I was solo because KDP had to be out of town that afternoon. It was up to me to entertain the 80 people who came to see our fixer. I told them all—in groups of 5 to 15—the saga of how we came to be here right next to the trail and operating a bed & breakfast.

In April of 2001, I was coming back late one night from a lecture I had in the Keene, NH area where I was particularly beaten up by folks there who were opposed to the proposed trail coming into their neighborhood. Once again, that evening, I heard the phrase that was becoming commonplace wherever I went. “We don’t want that trail and you don’t live near one so don’t tell us what to do.”

When coming back into Mass, I decided to get off the highway in the Northampton area and started to drive through the neighborhoods I knew that were bisected by the rail trail there. I was looking for a house near the rail trail that was on the market. These were the days before robust internet searches were possible.

That night around 11:00 pm I stumbled into 62 Chestnut St in the historic Civil War era, industrial village of Florence.

Kathy and I toured the house the next day and found it to be extremely run-down with a myriad of defects from the roof to the basement; however, it sat 8 feet from one of the first muni-built trails in New England. Our offer was accepted and we closed on September 7, 2001. We then began a renovation that took 14 months.

During the renovation, we decided to make this house the bed and breakfast we always wanted to do. We added a bathroom with a walk-in shower into both of the upstairs bedrooms and the bed & breakfast is very busy.



We call it Sugar Maple Trailside Inn and have been featured in Yankee Magazine’s 70th anniversary issue.

When we first opened as a bed and breakfast many years ago now, I would go into those pressure-packed meetings in a place where the idea of the trail wasn’t seen with general favor. I’d say something like; “I hear your fear, but we live eight feet from one of the oldest muni-built trails in the region and we operate a B&B there. If you are really fearful, we’ll give you a complementary week night stay. It has to be on a week-night because we want you to wake up to the laughter of kids biking to school.” And how many kids bike to school in your town? I say.

This effectively puts the dead-enders off to one side and then the majority would vote to support the trail.

While recounting that story—and effectively how we came to be there with a bed and breakfast—to the people on the tour that weekend, I was struck by all the question marks that arose each time I recounted that story and how this all happened.

During the Civil War, the Florence Sewing Machine Factory was booming with Army orders for sewing machines. And of course, the Union Army was recruiting soldiers in the area too.

The factory told their department heads that if they stayed with the firm and didn’t go off to war, the factory would build each of them a house on Chestnut Street—near the factory.

Nine houses were built—all 1.5 stories tall farmhouse style houses.

This home was built in 1865, and in 1868, the railroad was built 8 feet from this house. That’s when things really got interesting for the next 101 years.

We bought the house in 2001, renovated it for 21st century sensibilities and operate a small bed & breakfast there.

In 2003, in addition to winning the Historic Preservation Award that year, the house and the extensive renovation there was also featured on HGTV. . [Here’s the link](#) to the HGTV, 5-minute video.

The people on the historic home tour were shocked and actually some were in complete disbelief that people could actually be opposed to having a rail trail or bikeway in their neighborhood. They simply couldn't believe it.

For me, that was one of the most notable take-homes from the event. Here we are, this far into the 21st century, and there is a default stance of shock and disbelief that people could be opposed to these places. It just reminded me that I have to find time to finish the memoir I'm working on. I've got a million stories.

And I want to remind you all, that building a rail trail is among the hardest things a community can do. In the last issue of this e-newsletter a few weeks ago we saw the trail finally getting built in Stoneham where this was a 30- year, heroic effort led by Cameron Bain, who I've known since the mid-'90s. An honorable fellow for sure, but also a tenacious one, too.

Also in that issue, we also saw that the trail in Swampscott received funding to build out a section. A "phase one" as it were. Swampscott was a "heavy lift" in the face of extreme opposition.

There are still places in the region where hard-liner opposition is entrenched like Dedham and one of the key reasons I started this newsletter, brought on editor Tiffany Lyman- Olszewski of Rhyme.Digital to help produce and curate this. All because of those other places where the controversy is still underway.

This e newsletter does help keep my "battle-hardened veterans" in the game and not get burned out, or discouraged by anti-path extremists. But here in Northampton, where the trail has been in the ground for two generations, residents here are simply stunned that it is seen as controversial in some places.

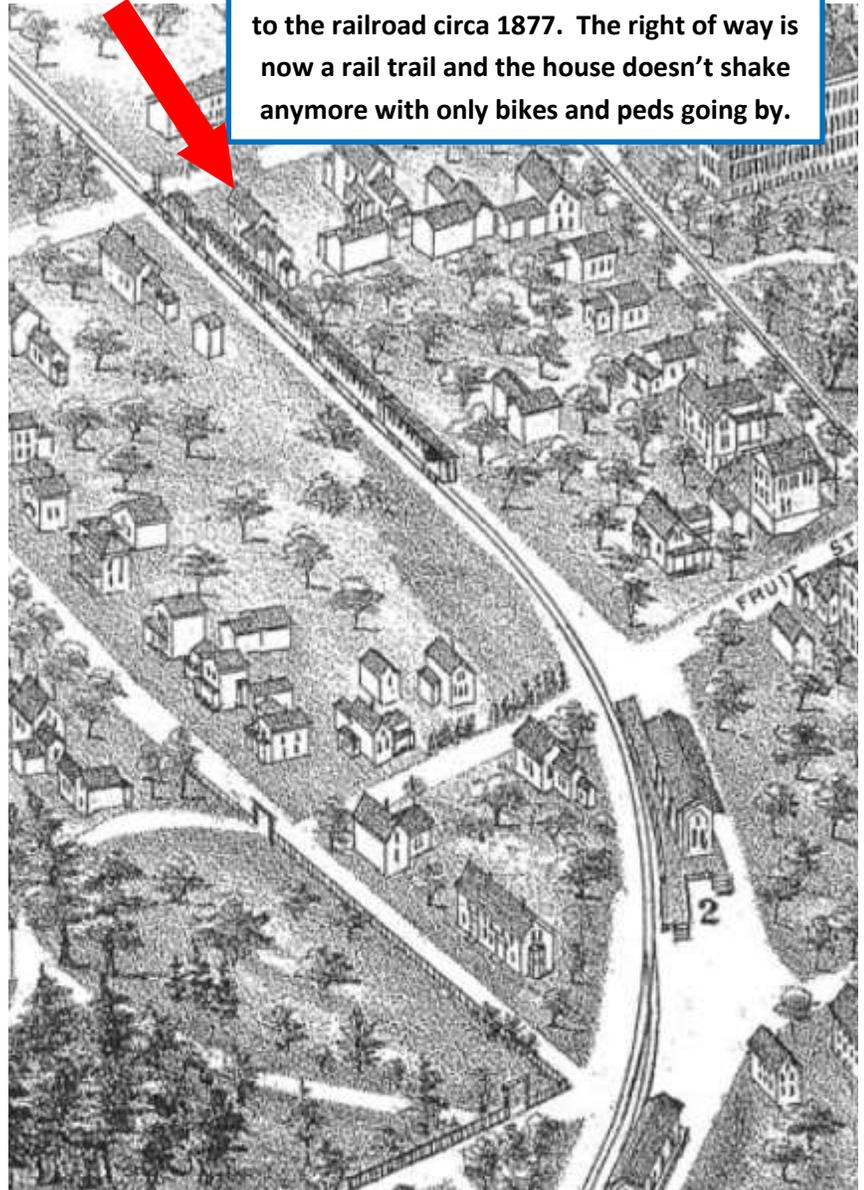
I'll close this little section by pointing out on other oddity about our house on the rail trail in the historic Civil Ward era industrial village of Florence.

When the railroad was planned to be built only 8 feet from the house, the railroad officials offered up a mitigation of sorts. They proposed to reinforce the plaster ceilings by nailing up from below, lath-strips. And since that wasn't going to be attractive, they then put-up tautly hung canvas. So taut you can't see it drooping, but none-the-less, it is flexible so when the trains were passing by, the reinforced plaster ceilings held and flexible ceilings flexed.

The railroad ran like this until 1969, and then in 1976, there was an embryonic effort to convert the dead corridor into a linear park—a bike path. (The phrase rail trail hadn't even been invented yet.) And then in 1982, all of 6 years later, the corridor was converted to the bike path.

The house doesn't shake anymore with only bikes and pedestrians going by. And the only time the canvas ceiling moves now is when I do a little "show and tell" for the guests at the bed & breakfast.

A "birds-eye view" map view of our house next to the railroad circa 1877. The right of way is now a rail trail and the house doesn't shake anymore with only bikes and peds going by.



Kathy Della Penna, my lovely bride of 30 years and co-owner of Sugar Maple Trailside Inn with Thelma our tan Scottish Terrier-ist meeting ZeeZee, a neighbor's Great Dane.