

A SPECIAL GIFT TO OUR COMMUNITIES FROM VISIONARY LEADERS OF THE 1970s

By Craig Della Penna

One of the most notable things about New England that most people don't realize is the super-abundance of unused former steam railroad corridors. In fact, since the early 1960s, there have been over 70,000 miles of former steam railroad corridor taken out of the nation's inventory, and the majority of this mileage is here in the Northeast. In the 1970s, the MBTA purchased a slew of old Boston & Maine Railroad, and New Haven Railroad branch lines in over 60 communities in Eastern Mass.

Most of these were dormant or abandoned, and though they didn't know what would happen with them, a rail trail wasn't really a consideration. Though there were a few rail trails created from former RRs in a few scattered places in New England, it was not a common thing. So those dormant branch lines in Eastern Mass, complete with the rails still in place, sat dormant and forgotten and the forest began to take over and overgrow these rights of way.

Today, within a 125-mile radius of my house in Northampton, there are currently about 200 separate projects underway that will provide non-motorized options for day-to-day use. They don't lead to forgotten, coal-mine branch lines where no one lives; this network once led to huge antediluvian mill complexes, which today have been largely converted to apartments or condos or offices. The network of off-road paths that can be built in southern New England is simply unmatched anywhere else in North America and they connect right where people live, work, play, and attend school.