

NY MILEPOST

The Harlem Valley Rail Trail follows the route of the New York Central Railroad's Harlem Division, which connected New York City with Chatham, New York. The concrete sign nearby is a railroad milepost marker. Many US railroads installed mileposts along their tracks, and many still use them today. The number indicates the distance in miles from the beginning of the route, and the letters denote the first station's location. Along the former Harlem Division, "NY" means New York City, where Grand Central Terminal on 42nd Street in Manhattan is milepost zero.

Milepost markers have always been an important part of railroad operations and safety. They tell conductors, engineers, and other railroaders where they are located on each line. Before locomotives were equipped with speedometers, railroad engineers used these markers and a pocket watch to calculate their speed and the distance and time to their destination. Maintenance workers use milepost numbers to identify locations where repairs to track, bridges, signals, and tunnels are needed.

Communication is key for preventing railroad accidents and collisions, and mileposts play a role. During the nineteenth century, station agents coordinated safe train movements first by telegraph and later by telephone. By the mid-twentieth century, train dispatchers in centralized locations communicated directly with train crews by radio. In all these communications, agents and dispatchers used—and still use—milepost numbers when instructing train crews to occupy track, meet other trains, run at reduced speeds, watch for hazards, and observe other operating rules on specified sections of railroad.

W WHISTLE POST

The concrete sign nearby, called a whistle post, is one of many installed along the New York Central Railroad's Harlem Division, now the Harlem Valley Rail Trail. These whistle posts, marked with a capital "W," served an important safety function. Placed near roadway intersections, also called grade crossings, they let locomotive engineers know when to blow their whistles—nowadays, usually horns—to alert pedestrians and motorists of the approaching train. Locomotive engineers in the United States use a standard pattern of two long blasts, followed by a short blast and a final long blast, for grade crossing warnings:

