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Ten Years on the River

SCOTT LOTHES EXPLORES
TEN YEARS OF CHANGE ON THE
UPPER MISSISSIPPI

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PHOTO: SCOTT LOTHES



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Doing it Right

THE RAILS-TO-TRAILS CONSERVANCY website, on June 11, 2021, reported there are 2,255 rail-trails in the U.S., offering 24,699 miles of right-of-way. Another 854 rail-trail projects are set to add 9,081 miles to that total, with more likely to follow.

One result of this growth is an increasing emphasis among rail-trail organizations on assembling multiple trails into regional networks. An early and well-known example is the Great Allegheny Passage (<https://gaptrail.org>), a 328-mile route made up of a former canal tow-path and rail trails between Washington, D.C., and Pittsburgh. Another is the Grand Illinois Trail (<https://tinyurl.com/47vhzwbw>), connecting 10 trails totaling 535 miles that run from Lake Michigan to the Mississippi River along the Illinois/Wisconsin border, then loops south and returns to Chicago along the Illinois River and the Hennepin Canal. The proposed 3,744-mile Great American Rail-Trail (<https://tinyurl.com/wtf-8bjnj>), linking Washington, D.C., with Seattle was announced in 2019.

This activity presents the railroad heritage industry with a unique opportunity. We can reach larger, more diverse, and growing markets with our story; demonstrate economic impact on our communities; and stimulate community investment in restoring and promoting thousands of rail heritage sites along trail routes nationwide, enabling those already restored to have a more robust impact.

Case in Point: Headlines read “On Time, Under Budget” when New York announced completion and opening of the 750-mile Empire State Trail (<https://empiretrail.ny.gov>) on December 30, 2020. The EST connects New York City with Albany, where it splits to go either to the Canadian border or to Buffalo, and is an assemblage of new and existing rail, canal, and biking/hiking-safe highway trails. Among them, the paved 28-mile Maybrook Trailway (<https://tinyurl.com/tjkkxpnu>) from Hopewell Junction south to Brewster occupies a portion of the former New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad’s busy route between Maybrook, N.Y., and Cedar Hill, Conn.; and the 35-mile Albany-Hudson Electric Trail (<https://tinyurl.com/d9yzcvhp>) between Hudson and Rensselaer, once an interurban operation.

Therein lies the origin of this column.

The Maybrook Line

Welcome to the Empire State Trail’s Maybrook Trailway, which follows the Brewster-to-Hopewell Junction portion of the former New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad “Maybrook Line,” once an important New England freight rail gateway.



The Maybrook

East-west rail traffic south of Albany crossed the Hudson River on freight car ferries between Beacon and Newburgh until 1889, when the railroad bridge across the river was completed at Poughkeepsie. The “New Haven,” then southern New England’s dominant railroad, consolidated several existing end-to-end rail lines by 1904 to create the 125-mile-long Maybrook Line. The Maybrook moved freight gathered from five railroads converging at a large freight yard west of the Hudson in Maybrook, Orange County. From there, the freight was carried east across the river at Poughkeepsie, over the mountains of Dutchess and Putnam Counties, and ultimately to the Cedar Hill freight yard outside New Haven, Connecticut.

Rise and Fall

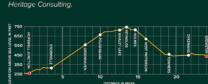
Like its hilly route, the Maybrook had its ups and downs. It was busy during World War I but lost traffic during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The Maybrook’s finest hour was during World War II, when powerful New Haven steam locomotives moved record freight tonnage over the line. After the war, traffic declined again, and diesel locomotives replaced steam in 1947. Parallel competition from Penn Central rail lines after 1968 and Interstate 84 after 1971 further eroded service. A 1974 fire resulted in the permanent closure of the Poughkeepsie bridge, ending Maybrook Line long-distance freight trains and altering regional freight rail patterns. The last freight train ran on the Brewster-to-Hopewell Junction portion of the line in 1992.



Metro-North Railroad



▲ MAYBROOK LINE
The Maybrook Line was a key rail freight connection across the Hudson River. The Maybrook Trainway follows the section between Brewster and Hopewell Junction. Source: Milestone Heritage Consulting.



▲ STEEP GRADES
The Maybrook Line crossed the Appalachian Mountains in Dutchess and Putnam Counties, climbing grades as steep as 1.22 percent westbound and over 1.3 percent westbound. Source: Milestone Heritage Consulting.

▲ “MAYBROOK BOUND”
The painting of New Haven Railroad steam locomotive-powered freight trains passing Poughkeepsie, New York, captures the spirit of mountain railroading on the Maybrook Line. Source: William G. Dulmaine Jr.

Rail to Trail

Today, the Empire State Trail follows the route of the former Maybrook Line for forty-four miles from Brewster to Highland, New York, along the Maybrook Trailway, the William R. Steinhilber Dutchess Rail Trail, the Walkway Over the Hudson, and the Hudson Valley Rail Trail.



▲ MOUNTAIN RAILROADING
The New Haven Railroad’s powerful steam locomotives pulled—and pushed—heavy Maybrook Line trains like the eastbound freight on Deep Hill at Poughkeepsie in 1950. Source: Kent Cochrane / Thomas J. MacNamara Collection.

This introductory panel appears at eight locations along the Maybrook Trailway where visitors park and enter the trail. It gives an overview of the history of the right-of-way, where it went, and why it was important to railroading. GRAPHIC DESIGN BY ALTA PLANNING + DESIGN, INC.; IMAGE CREDITS, CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: KENT COCHRANE, WILLIAM G. DULMAINE JR., KENT COCHRANE/THOMAS J. MACNAMARA COLLECTION, MILESTONE HERITAGE CONSULTING, EMILY MOSER

Matt Kierstead, whose talent and company, Milestone Heritage Consulting, created and installed heritage signs along both routes, called his work to my attention. The signs acquaint trail users with what once made up the routes the trails follow, and why they were important. That’s standard stuff. But Matt’s signs feature several innovative strategies that enhance their value to trail management and trail users alike. The signs shown here are from the Maybrook Trailway.

First, consider the sign above, titled “The Maybrook Line.” The illustrations offer a variety of images — historic photographs, color diagrams, and a work of art, this one by American Society of Railway Artists Founding Member William G. Dulmaine Jr. — to nail the recommended 3-30-3 formula for such signs. The “3-30-3” refers to 3-second content for those who read the headlines and subheads only, 30-second content for those who will read the image captions as well, and 3-minute content for those who will read the entire sign and study the images. (Me, for example.)

A second innovation, unique in my experience, is the decision by trail management to place “The Maybrook Line” signs at eight locations along the Maybrook Trailway. One can be found at designated trailheads, where visitors park and enter the trail. In this way,

the trail’s users will find the other signs aid in providing context to their growing knowledge. When you consider that New York state forecasts 8.6 million annual visitors — cyclists, hikers, runners, cross-country skiers, and snowshoers — to the network, the signs become an important tool to capture and hold the interest of said visitors.

About the repeated sign Matt Kierstead added, “It made sense for the first, introductory panel to tell the story of the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad and its Maybrook Line. It was important to emphasize this trail is a segment of a much longer rail line that was once a key New England freight gateway, illustrated by Emily Moser’s excellent regional railroad map, and also that trails at either end continue on the Maybrook route, including the well-known and spectacular Walkway Over the Hudson State Park, and to promote it as a link in the statewide Empire State Trail. From the start of the project I wanted to emphasize the drama of the ‘mountain railroading’ story, of how the New Haven got over the Appalachians on this section of the Maybrook, and one panel located at a dramatic horseshoe curve rock cut near the line’s summit (included here) is devoted to the topography and steam-era helper operations, including an exaggerated route grade profile



The panel at the east throat of the Poughaug rock cut near the summit of the Maybrook Trailway illustrates mountain railroading once found here. To emphasize the grade hikers and cyclists may have just conquered, a postcard of the cut and a grade route profile are provided. Kierstead describes this setting as “presenting railroading as a linear technological landscape.”

MATT KIERSTEAD PHOTO

diagram. That theme and diagram are also incorporated in the repeated introductory panel. This information explains and interprets the visceral trail user experience as they travel up and down the long eastbound and westbound grades (over 1.3 percent at one point). Panels also interpret site-specific locations like the hamlet of Stormville and the natural history of the Great Swamp.” This variety of images — historic photographs, railroad art, maps, and more — not only ties the signs together as an unfolding story, but appeals to the widest possible range of interests.

Andy Beers, director of the Empire State Trail, points out that such signs make trail users realize “why this path is here in the first place.” After a pause, he adds, “Many people don’t realize trains once ran on this route.”

Kierstead went on to argue, “It makes sense for the overall creative process for any rail trail.” He then added specifics that apply to the Maybrook Trailway. “The overall interpretive project objective anywhere is to engage, excite, and educate. Some of the approach, concept, and content is driven upfront by circumstances and logic and some evolves organically once you get started on the research and fieldwork. For a rail trail, it’s a given you have a historic linear transportation corridor that carried a railroad, negotiated geography, influenced settlement, and grew the economy. I believe rail trails are not just recreational corridors, but also heritage tourism and local education assets. I like to take a cultural landscape approach, interpreting not just the history of a trail’s rail line and its infrastructure and technology, but also its broader impacts on community growth and development. It is logical to do a first, introductory

panel that captures the history from pre-railroad times to current trail construction; that panel gets repeated at trailheads and parking lots. Then there can be thematic panels about wildlife, watercourses, Native Americans, railroad depots, or other things common to multiple locations that also get repeated at the applicable places. Most of the rest of the panels are site-specific for locations along the trail. Some of those topics are obvious at the start of the research, and others that you initially had no idea about emerge as important through the research. On the panels, the topics are conveyed with an economic use of words and ideally as many meaningful quality images as you can comfortably fit that strongly support and illustrate the theme.”

Asked what obstacles he encountered in creating this project, Kierstead replied with a list, most of which no doubt accompanies many such projects. “The biggest challenge was conducting the coordination, outreach, research — image identification, securing permission, obtaining digital files, reading, synthesis, draft and final writing, collaboration with illustrators and the graphic designer, securing local historian and subject expert peer reviews, and everything else that goes into doing this kind of project right, across two counties and with multiple communities, on an accelerated schedule.” He did add one more challenge we hope was unique — “all throughout, dealing with the entire 2020 COVID pandemic.”

To identify rail-trail organizations in your region, go to Rails-to-Trails Conservancy’s Trail Link website (www.trailink.com), enter your location, and be taken to a list of the trails in your vicinity. Each trail listed links to a dedicated content page. There, scroll down to just below the “View Trail Map” banner on the right. Under “Related Content” you’ll find links to local organizations responsible for that trail.

You will find more information on the Empire State Trail at <https://tinyurl.com/yxlp2bx9> where a *Highlands Current* article includes a time-lapse video of the Maybrook Trailway; and www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/the-longest-rail-trail-in-the-us-is-now-open-in-new-york-state for a *National Geographic* article. For information about signs and other ways you can enhance the appeal and meaning of trails in your area, contact Matt Kierstead at Milestone Heritage Consulting at www.milestoneheritage.com or (845) 236-3480. 📧

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