

History of the New Boston Railroad

edited by Dan Rothman, July 2014

The New Boston Railroad was a five or six mile railroad line which connected New Boston, New Hampshire to Goffstown, Manchester, Boston, and points beyond. The railroad operated from 1893 to 1931. Now in the 21st century its route is being converted to a “rail trail” along the picturesque Piscataquog River.



June 22, 1893 dedication of the New Boston Railroad

Note two steam locomotives, a horse-drawn carriage and a stagecoach.

The depot bridge is visible at the right edge of the photograph, but the railroad depot itself hasn't been built yet.

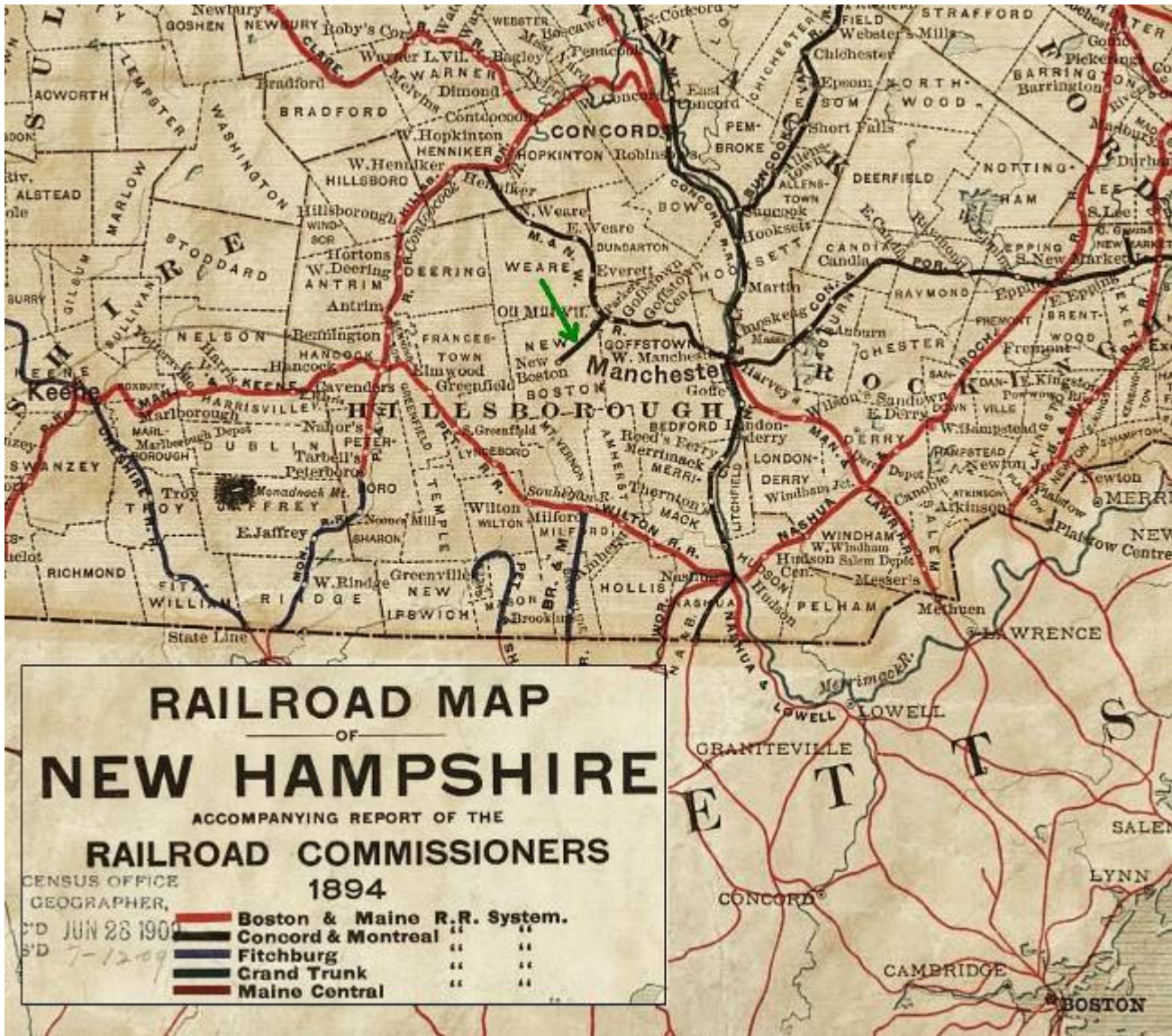
On **June 22, 1893** the New Boston Railroad was dedicated with cannon-fire, a brass band, orations, and a banquet for 1,000 people under a tent. The *Manchester Union* wrote two days later of the event:

Cause for this rejoicing is found in the six miles of shining steel rail which stretches, like a big bright ribbon, out from Parker's station, along the winding course of the Piscataquog, between the beautiful hills of the valley, through lowlands of level green, and rounding a bluff in a long curve comes to an end in the historic old town of New Boston.

Today, the tracks are gone and the old railroad bed is an unpaved rail trail used by dog-walkers, mountain bikers and cross-country skiers. But from 1893 through the 1920s, the railroad played an important role in New Boston's history.

The train ran between New Boston and Manchester twice a day for almost forty years. There was a “flag stop” – the train stopped upon request – at Lang's Bridge (now called Gregg Mill Bridge), where the stone building still stands. A fieldstone railroad depot was built at the end of the line in New Boston village, and a carriage met the train to bring passengers to the Columbia Hotel or The Tavern.

In just one week in September 1893 the train carried 500 passengers. An 1894 news item tells that 12,000 barrels of apples were shipped from New Boston to be exported to Europe, mainly to England. In addition to apples, large quantities of lumber were shipped as well as finished goods like boxes from Butterfield's Mill.



The New Boston Railroad is the spur in the center of this map indicated by a green arrow. Plans were made to continue it west to Greenfield but this did not happen.

A primary investor in the New Boston Railroad was Joseph Reed (J.R.) Whipple, a New Boston native who made his fortune running three hotels in Boston, MA: the Parker House, Young's Hotel and the Hotel Touraine. In 1881, J.R. established the 2,500-acre Valley View Farm in New Boston to supply his hotels with dairy products, pork, poultry, eggs, cider and vinegar. Once the railroad was complete, trains carried farm produce to Boston and on the return trip brought slops back to New Boston to feed the pigs and chickens.

J.R. Whipple's modern Creamery produced 2,000 quarts of cream, 6,000 quarts of milk and 4 tons of butter per month. The Creamery still stands next to Dodge's Store in the New Boston village.

J.R. Whipple died in 1912, his Valley View Farm was sold at auction in 1921, and New Boston's economic woes made the railroad unprofitable. In the 1920s the Boston & Maine Railroad tried to discontinue service on the New Boston line, but this was met with opposition from the community.

In June of 1931, the last passenger train left New Boston. Freight service continued at least a month longer but it soon ended too. By June 1935 the railroad tracks had been removed.



Timeline for New Boston Railroad Company

February 19, 1891 - The New Boston Railroad Company is incorporated.

September 1892 - Construction of the railroad begins.

June 22, 1893 - Railroad dedication ceremony is held.

February 2, 1895 - The depot burns; it is quickly rebuilt.

June 13, 1931 - The last passenger train came up at 2:55 P.M. Freight service continues a little while longer.

June 1935 - The tracks are removed.

1975-1976 - The Piscataquog Watershed Association acquires the abandoned railroad bed from the Boston and Maine Railroad; the PWA deeds this land to the Town of New Boston in 1979.

2000 - A new footbridge is built across the Middle Branch of the Piscataquog River to reconnect two halves of the Rail Trail.

INCORPORATION

1864 The State of New Hampshire issues a charter to the Manchester and Keene RR “to build a line from Parker’s Station on the New Hampshire Central RR to Keene, NH on the Cheshire RR, via New Boston, Frankestown, Greenfield, Hancock and the Dublin-Nelson (now Harrisville) area,” according to a 1990 letter by railroad historian Harry Rockwood.

Note: This proposed line was not built, but it’s interesting to note that in 1864 and 1893 there were plans to make the New Boston Railroad a “through line”. The fact that the NBRR never extended beyond New Boston may have contributed to its eventual demise, as operating a dead-end “spur line” is less profitable. However, even the Manchester – North Weare Railroad, which unlike the NBRR was a “through line”, did not survive the New Boston Railroad by many years.

February 19, 1891 The New Boston Railroad Company is incorporated. A newspaper wrote: “A bill has been introduced in the legislature incorporating the New Boston railway company, with a capital stock of \$100,000. The route will be from a point on the Manchester and North Weare road in Goffstown to the business center in New Boston.”

CONSTRUCTION

September 1892 Construction of the railroad begins; cost not to exceed \$100,000. The final cost was \$84,000.

Newspaper accounts describe the construction of the railroad:

November 19, 1892 “There are 70 Italian workers on the R.R. encamped near Col. Gregg’s residence. The daily blasting of rocks reminds us that the work is nearing completion.”

December 3, 1892 “Last Thursday the rails of the railroad were laid so that the cars came up 1 ½ miles above Parker Station. The R.R. station at Gregg’s bridge will give the people of this vicinity a fine chance to take summer boarders.”

January 3, 1893 “At 4:30 p.m. the last rails of NBRR were in place and the locomotive stood at the terminus on the north bank of the Piscataquog opposite the creamery and announced by one loud whistle that the work was complete. The depot will be built this coming spring.”

January 7, 1893 “Telegraph poles are set to the village and the locomotive has been making trips to town.”

February 4, 1893 “The granite for the [Depot Street] bridge is arriving by cars on the railroad.”

February 11, 1893 “Mr. Bailey of Suncook, the contractor for building the bridge, has commenced work.”



February 18, 1893 “A bill has been introduced in the Legislature to connect the N.B. railroad by an extension to Greenfield.” *This extension was never built. In 2014, the Greenfield-Wilton line is still in occasional use.*

March 25, 1893 “George Robbins will be station agent in N.B., Albert Brown at Parkers and W.P. Martin, a baggagemaster on the No. Weare Road will be the conductor on the N.B. train.”

May 13, 1893 “The heavy rain of May 4th caused the Piscataquog to overflow its banks near the terminus of the railroad, and flooded the land on both sides. There were many anxious spectators watching the new bridge for hours and at one o’clock an immense tree stump was seen rushing along on the foaming water towards the bridge, which when it hit, carried the iron work about 200 feet before it sank.

“Had the workmen been allowed another day before the rain they would undoubtedly have made it secure against such disasters. Several days have been employed in getting the iron out of the water; it was such a bent and twisted condition. The bridge should have been named ‘fatal bridge’ since accidents have been frequent from the commence of its construction.”

Not mentioned in this article is the death by drowning of Julia Farley, who fell into the river and perished on May 8. Julia was the wife of Charles E. Farley, the famous violin-maker who lived in the 1888 house next to what is now Dodge’s Store, just upstream from the Depot Bridge. The disconsolate widower moved from New Boston to Boston after his wife’s death.



*Tavern Carriage waits at the Depot built in late 1893.
This photo was taken after the B&M Railroad leased this line in 1895.*

June 2, 1893 First scheduled train service begins: two daily trains each way connecting with the Manchester trains at Parker Station in Goffstown.

Today, Parker's Station Depot Store is the home of the Goffstown Historical Society near Route 114 and the New Boston town line.



DEDICATION

June 22, 1893 The formal dedication ceremony for the New Boston Railroad is held.

New Boston's Molly Stark Cannon saluted five railroad cars of distinguished guests as they arrived by train at the temporary depot. These guests included New Hampshire Governor John Butler Smith, U.S. Senator J.H. Gallinger and the directors of the Concord & Montreal Railroad and the New Boston Railroad. The train had left Manchester at 10:30 A.M. and arrived in New Boston less than an hour later.

The distinguished guests were met by New Boston's 25-piece brass band who escorted them to the Church on the Hill where speeches were made. Dinner was served to 1,000 people (some accounts say 1,800) by waiters from Whipple's Boston hotels in a tent on the Common opposite the 1823 Church on the Hill.



The Church on the Hill stood in a field at the top of Molly Stark Lane, facing Bedford Road. It was no longer in regular use by 1893, as its congregation had relocated to the Presbyterian Church (now New Boston Community Church) down in the village. Seven years after the Railroad Dedication, the hilltop church was struck by lightning and burned to the ground.

A newspaper reported the June 22, 1893 banquet celebrating the Opening of the New Boston R.R. as follows:

“The supply of viands was over and above that necessary, nobody being slighted. They comprised baked beans, sandwiches, meats chicken croquettes, hard-shell crabs, pies, cake, coffee and lemonade. The beverages were satisfactorily dispensed by comely New Boston maidens.”

Editor's note: I regret that we have no photographs of the banquet or the comely maidens.

The Daily Mirror wrote: “The crowd present was variously estimated from three to four thousand.” Note that the U.S. Census reports that New Boston's entire population was about 1,000 people at this time.

Soon after the dedication, a new depot was built. The New Boston Railroad Depot was designed by Bradford Lee Gilbert, who designed many American railroad stations. Here are his sketches:





Depot signs indicate that American Express and Western Union services were available.

DEPOT FIRE

February 2, 1895 The depot burns; it is later rebuilt.

"On the morning of February 2, 1895 the village people were awakened by the creamery fire whistle to find the depot afire. It started from a heater in the baggage department and nothing remained except the stone walls and part of the roof." - from a Rena Davis article in *The Goffstown News*.

It was a very cold night so the fire was difficult to extinguish. At this time New Boston had a hand-pumped fire engine plus a system of fire hydrants in the village pressurized by a steam engine in the Creamery. The Concord & Montreal Railroad located a combination car to be used as a temporary depot until the stone building could be rebuilt, which it was at a cost of \$10,000.



Damage to the photograph makes the Depot look like it's still on fire.

1895 Boston & Maine leases the railroad for 99 years.



Postcard with a March 1908 cancellation shows the bridge and depot.
The sender wrote "I got my overcoat and need it too."

GRADUAL DECLINE

1912 J.R. Whipple dies; his Valley View Farm will be sold at auction in 1921.

December 20, 1924 The New Boston Community Bulletin writes of "the proposal of the Boston and Maine Railroad to discontinue its service altogether to New Boston. The railroad's attempt to radically curtail our train service last summer was successfully met by the stern opposition and vigorous protest put forth by the citizens of New Boston under the leadership of the Chamber of Commerce.

"The problem now coming upon us again, so soon after last summer, threatens to be much more serious...

"Remember that the loss of train service undoubtedly means increased cost of living, decreased values in real estate, great inconvenience and possibly demoralization in business and farming interests, loss of population and depression in general."

From 1920 to 1930 New Boston's population declined from 768 to 693, its lowest ebb since the Revolutionary War.

1925 B & M petitions the U.S. Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) to abandon the New Boston spur but is opposed by the Town of New Boston, Merrimack Farmer's Exchange, and the Langdell Lumber Company.

END OF THE RAILROAD

June 13, 1931 William Fiske's diary records that the last passenger train came up at 2:55 P.M.

July 1931 The Boston & Maine Transportation Company advertises that it is still running two freight trains per day (leaving New Boston at 7:30 A.M. and 1:00 P.M. and leaving Manchester at 10:00 A.M. and 3:00 P.M., service daily except Sundays and holidays) and encourages townspeople to use this service: "Have the welfare of New Boston in mind"!

New Boston native Howard Towne remembers that after the steam locomotive train service to New Boston was discontinued there was a motorized train car that ran between New Boston and Manchester for a few years.

June 1935 William Fiske's diary reports that the railroad tracks are "all torn up!"

March 30, 1936 The Playground Association buys the depot from the N.B.R.R. for \$200.00 (Bill Mulligan wrote "one dollar, according to the deed") for a Community House.

The depot will later be used for:

- a classroom when the village school is overcrowded
- a Baptist Church before the Lyndeborough Road church is built
- a police station (1980s)
- Little People's Depot pre-school
- a private residence (today)

February 25, 1937 The New Boston Railroad Company is formally dissolved.

1970-75 "In 1970 negotiations began with the Boston and Maine Railroad to acquire the abandoned railroad bed which covered approximately 2.1 miles adjacent to the Piscataquog River from New Boston to Goffstown. The land was finally purchased in April 1975 for \$10,000. A second parcel of land consisting of 18.5 acres partly in New Boston and partly in Goffstown, was purchased for \$4,625 in June 1976. These parcels were subsequently deeded to the Town of New Boston." *Handwritten notes from the PWA Handbook 1979*

September 26, 2000 The New Boston Conservation Commission installs a new footbridge across the Middle Branch of the Piscataquog River to reconnect two halves of the Rail Trail. The old railroad bridge at this location was removed in 1936 – see Rena's notes below about Bill Mason.



The Lang Station still stands near Gregg Mill Bridge.

Additional notes:

Rena Davis wrote in 1976: “The railroad used to run under Parker Road near Howe Bridge. The underpass was a small wooden arched bridge with boxed sides that spanned the railroad tracks. It was removed and filled in with gravel after the railroad was abandoned.

“At the depot were a roundhouse and a turntable. The engine would stay over night in the roundhouse then early in the morning leave for its first run of the day. There was a water tower where the engine took on water just below the depot.”

“Bill Mason took down the R.R. bridge by Lang’s depot and used it to make a temporary bridge over the river at Kirsch’s mill after the 1936 flood took out this bridge.”

Note: Kirsch’s mill was on Route 13 / Mont Vernon Road across from what is now New Boston Pizza.

Alicia Walker of Weare NH wrote an article about the Manchester & North Weare Railroad in the July 1986 issue of the *B&M Bulletin*. She wrote:

“It is widely believed that in its early years the cars traveled backward either to or from New Boston, but here one relies on the word of those seniors blessed with good memory. After the B&M acquired the line a turntable was built adjacent to the New Boston station, so ending the discomfiture of queasier commuters.”

Sources:

“Building the New Boston Railroad”, Goffstown News articles by Rena Davis, April 8 & 15, 1976

“New Boston Greet the Iron Horse”, The Manchester Union, June 23, 1893.

“Old New Boston – Connected with the Outside World”, Daily Mirror and American, June 23, 1983

“The Manchester & North Weare Railroad” B&M Bulletin article by Alicia Walker, July 1986

See also our web page <http://www.newbostonhistoricalsociety.com/train.html>



The postcard “Whistling In” shows the train steaming along the Piscataquog River. Today these hills are heavily forested with second-growth trees.