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The Air Line Trail

By Philip Finch for the Eastford Historical Society



The train station at Abington, CT near Route 44. It was the closest train station to Eastford.

The Air Line began as a railroad line between Boston and New York. The term “air line” was used to describe the straightest practical means of connecting two points, or drawing a “line through the air.” For a rail line to be efficient and fast, it needs to have only minimal changes in grade along with subtle curves. So, railroad companies across the country tried to design and build these “air lines” wherever possible. Many of the regional projects failed. Building a railroad in basically a straight line proved far too expensive due to the numerous landfills, bridges, and tunnels that would be needed to scale the hilly countryside in Connecticut and other parts of the Northeastern United States.

Several different railroad companies were involved with building and operating the line between Boston and New York. The earliest was chartered as the Nor-

folk County Railroad of 1847. It eventually became known as the Boston, Hartford & Erie Railroad that, by the 1860's, connected Boston with Mechanicsville, just north of Putnam. In August 1872, the route was opened to Willimantic, where it linked with the New Haven, Middletown, & Willimantic Railroad and continued to points south and west and, eventually, New York City.

The Air Line was the closest railroad to Eastford, passing a few hundred feet from the Eastford border at its southeast corner. In the 1890's there was talk of a railroad line running from Willimantic through Eastford and on to Southbridge, MA. Although there was some surveying done in the area, the project never happened. Since Eastford town officials had not been able to persuade a railroad to connect the town with other areas, plans were made to get the town to the railroad.

N. Y., N. H. & H. R. R. Station,
Putnam, Conn.

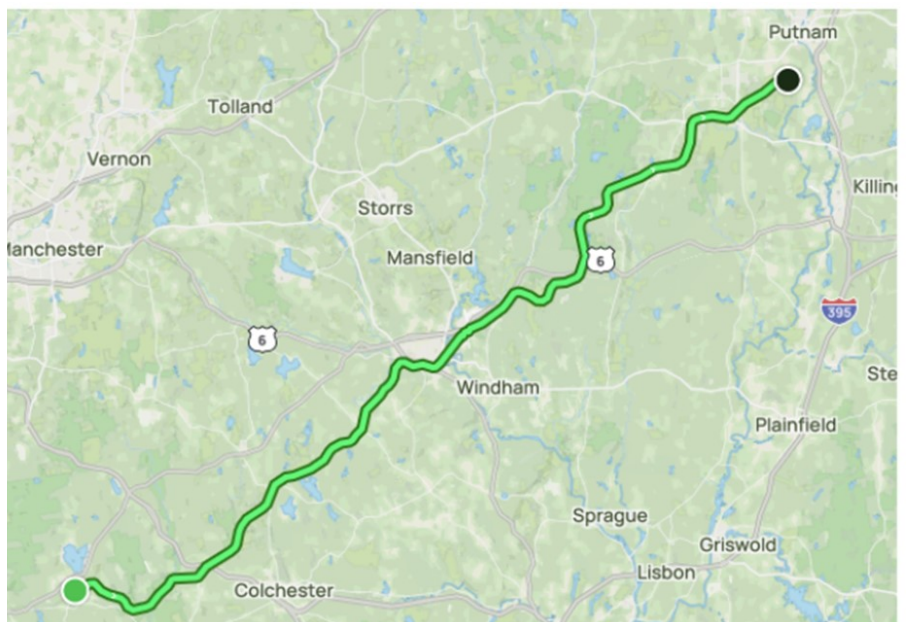


The Air Line station in Putnam, CT. You may recognize it today as the Crossings Brew Pub.

The closest station to Eastford on the Air Line was in Abington, about 5 miles east from Phoenixville. At the Town Meeting on October 4, 1909, a special tax of 9 mills on the list of 1909 was laid “to pay town share of building the new state road from Phoenixville to Abington.” We know that road today as Route 44.

The depot at Abington became a key transportation hub for Eastford. The station had a grain building where farmers could take their grains at harvest time. William Warren, an Eastford grain dealer, made regular trips to Abington to pick up grain to sell to his local customers. A milk train ran to Putnam and Boston providing dairy farmers access to more markets. Charlie Clark, a life long Eastford resident, used to talk about taking the milk wagon from Eastford to Abington and getting on the train to go see his brother in Putnam. Tractors were delivered, as many as seven at a time, to Abington and then on to Bowen's Garage. Horses in need of a break from the cobblestone streets of Manhattan were delivered by train to Abington and then on to Eastford for a restful vacation on Eastford's farmlands. Of course, there were more travel options for passengers looking to go

to Boston, New York or points west and south. Willimantic was a major intersection of railroads in New England and a stop on the Air Line. Each summer a special train car from New York would arrive in Willimantic bringing boys to spend two months at Camp Eastford on Crystal Pond.



The Air Line Trail south from Pomfret. Not exactly a straight line, but you get the idea.



The train station in Willimantic. The Air Line from New York brought boys to Camp Eastford each summer. They traveled on to Crystal Pond from Willimantic by automobile.



One of the many tractors that arrived in Abington via the Air Line and then on to Eastford.

The Air Line relied on passenger traffic, which was never reliably profitable. This meant the railroad was much more prone to financial trouble when the economy was struggling and people couldn't afford to travel. Another Boston to New York railroad line was built that paralleled the shore line and those population centers. Without many of the steep climbs and sharp curves that plagued the Air Line, this shoreline



The great flood of 1955 washed out the Air Line bridge over the Quinebaug River in Putnam and was never replaced. This marked the beginning of the end of rail service along the Air Line.

route brought additional competition for the dwindling number of passengers. In addition, better roads were being built and cars were becoming more affordable offering more transportation options for the masses anxious to travel.



A sign marking the Air Line Trail State Park.

After World War II, the Air Line was seeing little through traffic from Boston to New York except for local freight customers. In 1955, catastrophic flooding washed away the bridge over the Quinebaug River in Putnam forcing the railroad to abandon the line between Putnam and Pomfret. The North Windham to Pomfret segment was the next to go in 1962, and an even larger section, Portland to Willimantic, was abandoned in 1964. By 1970, except for a few short segments, the entire Air Line Route from Portland to Franklin, MA, had been abandoned. The rest of the line to Boston and New Haven survived and is still in use today.

But with every ending, there comes the possibility of a new beginning. The tracks themselves can be recycled, with rails sold as scrap metal and wooden ties used for landscaping. As tracks started being pulled out, people began walking, cycling and cross-country

skiing along the old corridors, exploring, enjoying nature, discovering railroad relics and the bridges and tunnels. The first abandoned rail corridor in the United States officially converted into a recreational trail was the Elroy-Sparta State Trail in Wisconsin. Opened in 1967, it began the nationwide movement of converting “rails” to “trails” which we now call rail trails.

It didn’t take long for that movement to come to Connecticut and a new life was found for sections of the old Air Line. The abandoned rail corridor between East Hampton and the Massachusetts state line was acquired by the Connecticut State Park System with the section from Windham to Pomfret opening to the public in 1969 as a bridle trail. In 1976, the trail designation was extended north to Town Farm Road in Putnam. The southern section from East Hampton to Willimantic was opened as a trail in 1986. The Thompson section was opened in 1992. The bridge



Air Line Train passing over the Lyman Viaduct which spanned more than 1,000 feet bridging a deep gorge near Colchester, CT.

over the Willimantic River to Bridge St. was opened in 2015, and an extension south to Portland opened in 2018. The state park now stretches over fifty miles in two sections across eastern Connecticut from Thompson to Portland. The most noticeable gap in the rail trail is a several mile section through Putnam where part of the old line is still in active use. Passing through state parks and forests, town parks, wildlife preserves, rivers and streams, the Air Line Trail connects to the Hop River Trail in Columbia and the Southern New England Trunkline Trail at the Massachusetts state line.

If you are interested in learning more about the history of the Air Line Trail join the Eastford Historical Society for our Annual Meeting and a presentation on the Air Line Trail on Thursday, June 19 at 7:00 p.m. in the lower level of the Eastford Town Office Building at 16 Westford Road.



An old livestock bridge over the railbed near Thompson, CT.