

Mt. Tom Branch (Manhan Rail Trail)

Original Owner: Connecticut River Railroad. Most commonly known owner is the Boston & Maine Railroad's Mt. Tom or Easthampton Branch. Branch of the New Haven RR)

Built: 1872

Last Passenger Train: 1926.

Abandoned: 1983.

First proposed to convert to a bike-path: 1990

Ribbon cutting as the City of Easthampton's Manhan Rail Trail (east leg): 2004

This branch was built in 1872 by the Connecticut River Railroad (CRRR) to allow the shippers in Easthampton the opportunity to have two choices in railroads to carry their goods.

The New Haven & Northampton Railroad (NH&N) was their only choice from 1856 onward and since the NH&N in 1871, allowed the Holyoke & Westfield Railroad to provide shippers in Holyoke a way to escape the onerous tactics of the CRRR, the CRRR wanted to pay their competitor back by building this branchline in their backyard.

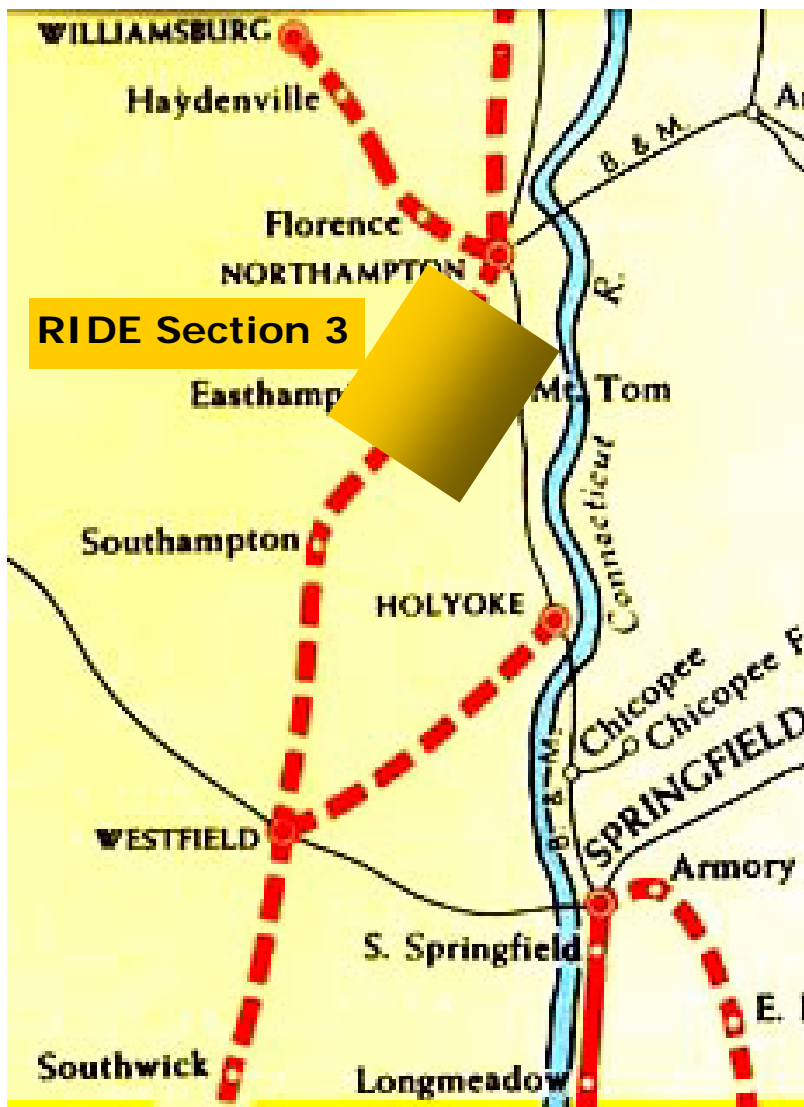
It never saw much traffic but was the scene of a potential railroad war in the early 1990s when Pinsky Railroad and their newly developed Pioneer Valley Railroad took over operations of the Canal Division line to Easthampton.

They were looking into providing a way to bring coal to the Mt. Tom power plant which was only a few hundred yards from the junction of the B&M's mainline track.

To prevent this 'back-door' coal train from operating, the B&M's new owners, Guilford Rail, chose to abandon the line, rather than chance a coal train becoming operational. Such a train would have cost Guilford 10s of thousands of dollars in lost revenue.

Interestingly, once it became apparent that Guilford would abandon the line rather than allow a possibility of competition, Pinsky decided to shut down operations to Easthampton too.

The idea of the Manhan Rail Trail then began to take hold.



Canal Division (Manhan Rail Trail)

Original Owner: New Haven & Northampton Railroad Most commonly known owner: New Haven Railroad (Canal Division of the New Haven RR) Last owner: Pinsky Railroad's Pioneer Valley Railroad.

Built: 1867-1868

Last Passenger Train: 1928.

Abandoned: 1992.

First proposed to convert to a bike-path: 1990

Ribbon cutting as the City of Easthampton's Manhan Rail Trail: June 19, 2004

Typical of many New England towns, Easthampton Massachusetts was a factory town with a number of large antediluvian mills--primarily textile mills. These complexes provided steady, well paying jobs for the residents and they also provided lucrative traffic to the railroad.

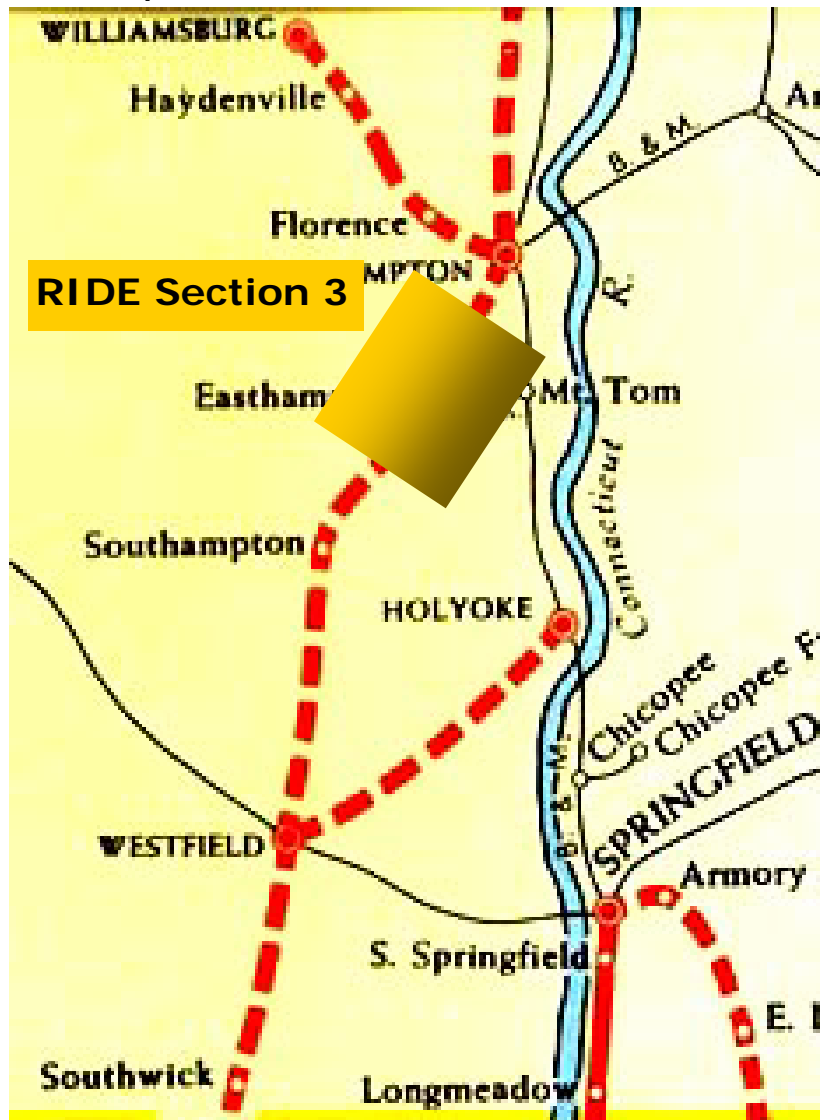
In fact, Easthampton's industrial base was so extensive, that it was served by two competing railroads--the New Haven Railroad's Canal Division and the Mt. Tom branch of the Boston & Maine Railroad.

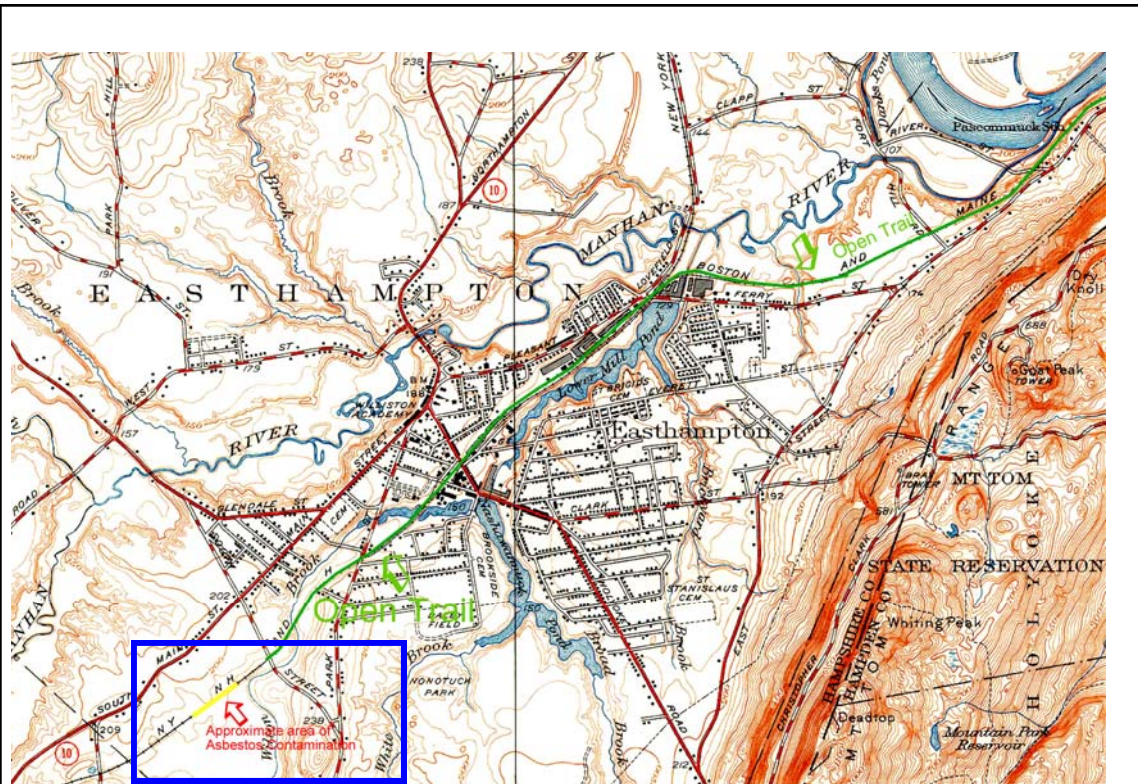
Prosperity reigned in Easthampton right up until the mid 1970s. Indeed, in 1974, the PennCentral Railroad--successor of the New Haven had over 4,000 cars a year going terminating in Easthampton.

By the late 1970s, changes in the environmental laws and relocation of businesses to places like North and South Carolina, brought about a shift that made the mill buildings in Easthampton largely dormant.

By the late 1980s traffic was down to under 500 cars a year, and by 1991, the Pioneer Valley Railroad (PVRR)--who had taken over all the trackage in town--instituted a several hundred dollar per-car surcharge on traffic terminating in Easthampton because of poor track conditions.

The last customer using the railroad in Easthampton was the W.R. Grace & Co.'s Zonolite plant and they too left town when the railroad wasn't able to serve them at a price that worked for them. 1992, the PVRR filed for abandonment of the approximately 5 miles of corridor in Easthampton.





By 1996, the idea of converting all the old trackage into a linear park or rail trail began to take hold. A local grass roots organization—the Friends of the Manhan Rail Trail—was created to help fund raise for the community’s portion of the cost to construct the trail and the Town Meeting voted that year to support the acquisition from the PVRR. By 1999, the PVRR removed the track and town acquired the corridor.

Around this time, rumors of asbestos contamination of a portion of the right-of-way on the south side of town began to surface. It turns out that the W.R. Grace & Co. plant, which operated here from 1962-92, used semi-processed vermiculite ore from the company’s giant Libby, Mont. mine at the Easthampton plant until 1984. That ore is now known to have been contaminated with tremolite asbestos,

Brief History of the Manhan Rail Trail.

- 1995-6 Easthampton receives Federal Enhancements Award and Town Meeting supports to acquire from the Pioneer Valley Railroad
- 1997 Award for design of Easthampton portion.
- 1999 Pioneer Valley Railroad removes track structure.
- 1999 Easthampton section design, 75% complete, MassHighway holds hearing.
- 2001 Rail Trail from South St to Fort Hill Road cleared and graded.
- 2002 100% design completed and accepted by MassHighway. Project put out to bid.
- 2002 Manhan Rail Trail mural by Nora Valdez is installed.
- 2003-4 Rail Trail is constructed by Lane Construction.
- June 19, 2004 Ribbon cutting for phase 1.

a suspected carcinogen. On May 11, 2000 Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP) and the Federal Environmental Protection Agency began testing of the grounds of the former W.R. Grace plant.

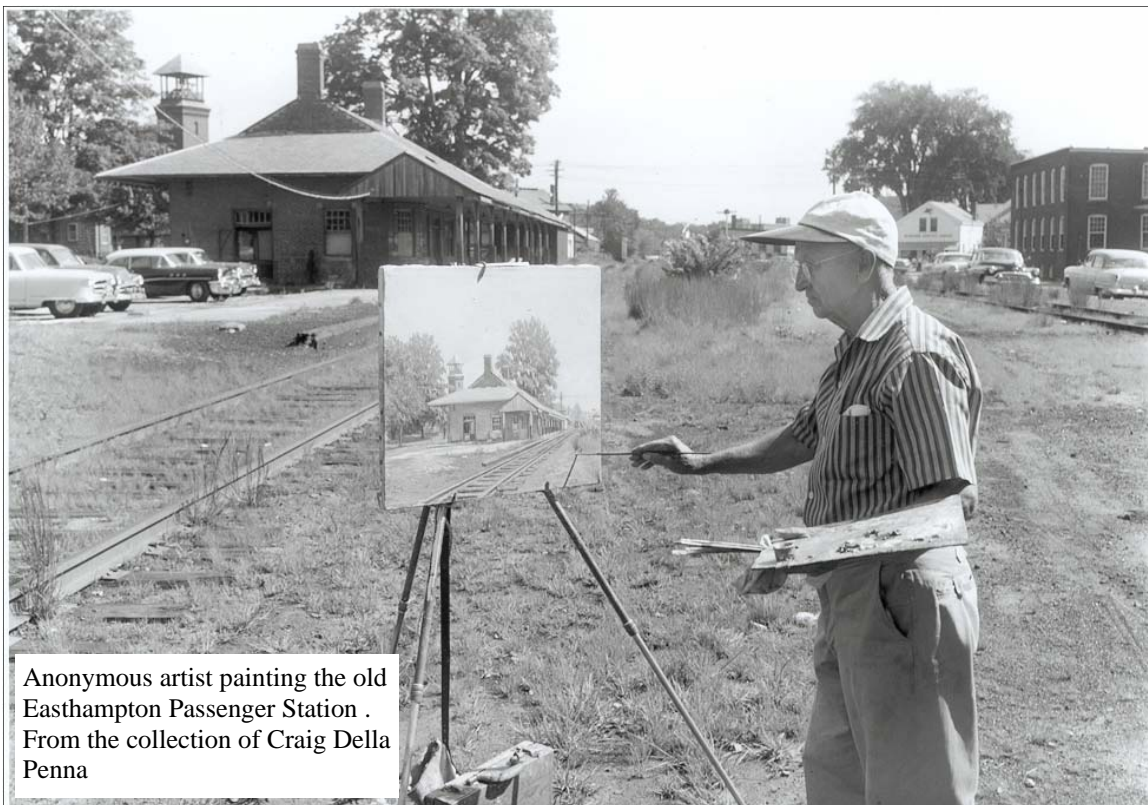
At the end of 2000, a patch of ground approximately 200 feet by 300 feet on the north side of the plant, showed tremolite asbestos levels of over 1 percent in laboratory testing on three out of 39 soil samples taken. The company agreed to conduct more test bores themselves.

By mid 2001, preliminary results of W.R. Grace's soil testing at the site

asbestos related lawsuits around the U.S. Grace claimed that in spite of that, they were committed to clean the site.

By the end of 2002, the city hired Tighe & Bond an environmental engineering company out of Westfield, Massachusetts to assess the degree of contamination and recommend a method to clean it up.

Grace backed away from an earlier promise to fund a cleanup of the site when it filed for bankruptcy protection at the end of 2001. After conducting tests that expanded on earlier soil testing done by the state Department of Environmental Protection, Tighe & Bond estimated it



Anonymous artist painting the old Easthampton Passenger Station . From the collection of Craig Della Penna

showed asbestos contamination extending about 700 feet north and 200 feet south of Wemelco Way along the abandoned rail bed.

At around this time, the W.R. Grace & Co. entered into Chapter 11 bankruptcy because of the proliferation of

would cost approximately \$250,000 to clean up the contamination along nearly 1,000 feet of the planned bike path route.

Early in 2003, the town submitted a request to the EPA for \$200,000 as a part of a new federal program, the aptly named Brownfields Clean Up Grant. However those grants were highly competitive

and over 1,200 other applicants sought funds as well. Easthampton made the first cut and was among the 500 other applicants (24 projects in New England) that made it to the final round in early 2003.

Around the same time in early 2003, the town of Easthampton filed a claim against W.R. Grace & Co. for its failure to clean up asbestos-contaminated soils at the site of its former manufacturing plant on Wemelco Way.

In June of 2003, Easthampton officials learned that their grant didn't survive the final cut. Though disappointed, they did announce that they planned to resubmit a new grant request for the following round which they did in the fall of 2003.

In December of 2003, their local Congressman John Olver—ranking Democrat on the powerful House Appropriations Committee announced that he had included \$18 million of transportation related projects for his district in a bill being shepherded through Congress. Included in that bill was a line item for \$750,000 to remediate the asbestos and buildout the last remaining unbuilt section of rail trail.



Boston & Maine Railroad freight train operating in downtown Easthampton in the early 1970s. Photo courtesy of Karl Stieg.