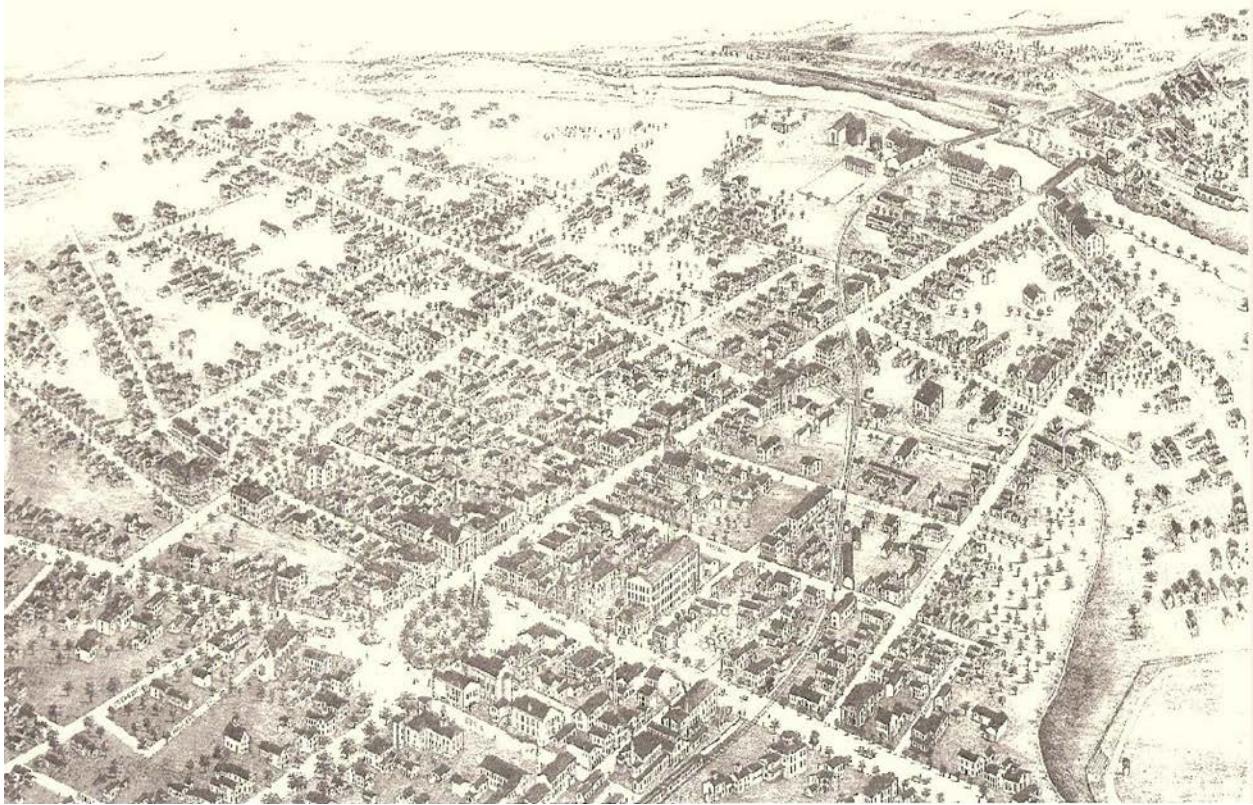


New York, New Haven, Hartford Railroad – Westfield

---by Matthew Michalik, Westfield State University Class of 2021

Looming above unaware travelers on Elm Street is a historical gem of Westfield that people drive underneath every day, the elevated railroad track. This piece of track is part of a larger railway line and is currently in the process of being converted into a rail trail, also known as the Columbia Greenway Rail Trail. The rail trail is a project that is going to allow people to cross from the northern side of the Westfield river all the way down to New Haven, Connecticut. In order to fully appreciate this trail, it is important to understand the history and its prominence to the Westfield community.

Westfield used to have a canal that was used as the city's main hub for transport up until 1841 when the railroads took over as main method of transportation. There were two railroads in Westfield, the Boston and Albany line (East to West) and the New York, New Haven, and Hartford line (North to South), this article will mainly focus on the history of the north to south line in Westfield (Historic Railroad). Both lines, in Westfield, were constructed by Irish immigrants who were seeking refuge from the harsh working conditions of their home country. The lines were both completely finished in 1871. The station for both lines used to be located in Depot Square, which was refurbished and is now the Tierney Insurance Building. From this area you could travel to places north, south, east and west of Westfield, making travel much simpler while simultaneously cutting down on travel time.

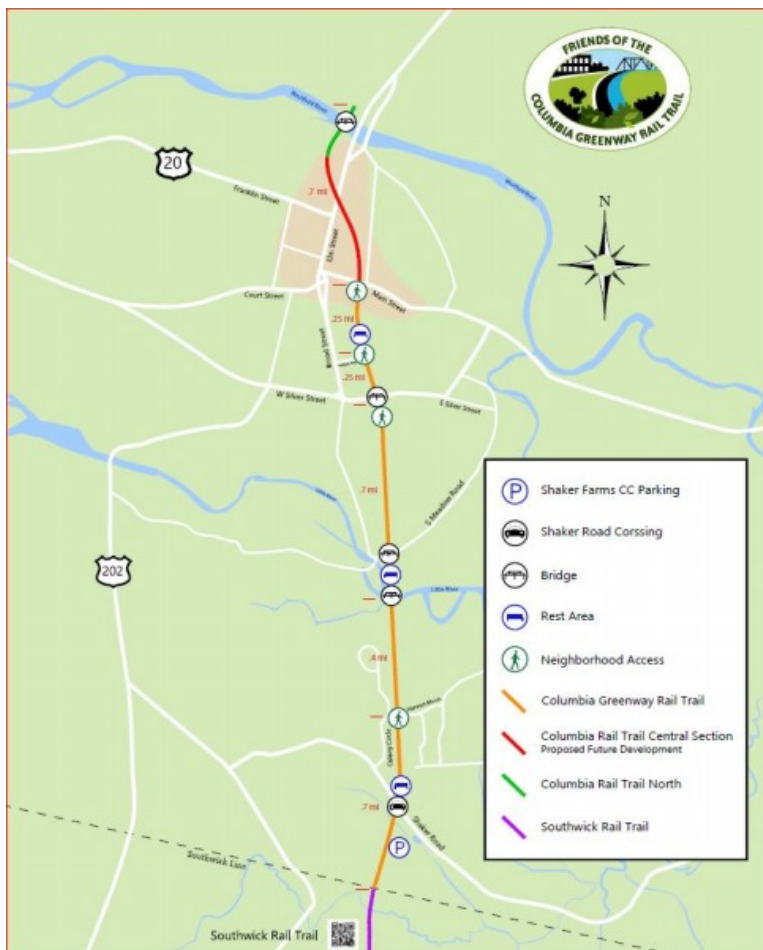


An aerial view of how Westfield looked with the Railroad cutting through it

While life improved with the integration of railroads into the Westfield society, some things ended up getting worse. The population of Westfield in the 1870s was around 6,500 inhabitants in the city (1870's Census). Due to the advancement in technology, the increase in job availability, and the improvement in transportation the population of Westfield almost doubled in size by 1900, jumping to 12,300 (1900-1920's Census). Going hand-in-hand with the population increase was the growth in automobile use in the city; this surge caused the rise of traffic in Westfield due to delays from the cars having to wait for trains to pass at crossings, which concurrently led to people becoming disgruntled. The remedy for this problem was the construction of an overpass for the railroad over Elm Street, this helped to alleviate some of the traffic and help to appease the citizens (Historic Railroad).

Along with traffic there were multiple accidents along this railway, one major one being on August 27, 1902. There was a train running from New Haven to Westfield and ran off the tracks only 200 yards after pulling out of the depot. In this accident only two people were affected, both of them being Westfield residents. The engine and the baggage car fell on their sides and the two residents were buried in the debris. Fireman Archie Wetmore was badly burned from the accident and he later died in the hospital from injuries. Engineer George Van Vechten was scratched up and suffered from scalding burns, but was not badly injured (The Westfield Athenaeum 79).

The railway operated until 1933 and has since then been converted into the rail trail. Fast



Map of the Greenway Rail Trial

forward to the present day, The Westfield portion of trail is the Columbia Greenway Rail Trail, which connects to the Southwick Rail Trail. Once the railway is fully converted it will be the second longest elevated greenway in the United States. According to the map, the trail will span 3 miles from the Westfield River down to the beginning of the Southwick trail. The Columbia Greenway is home to a rare occurrence in rail trails which is

multiple elevated bridges to cross. Westfield will be 1 of only 2 rail trails in the U.S. with an elevated crossing on it. Also along the trail there are historic informational signs located to help educate its users while walking, biking, or running along the trail (Historic Railroad). This is important because knowing information about the trail will help to strengthen the bond between the community through its history, like the railroad. If there is no connection with history then there is no continual bond between generations and that is when a community starts to become just a group of people who live in the same place.

The Westfield portion of the Columbia Greenway Rail Trail is slated to be complete by 2020; there has been much opposition to the completion of this project by the community, people say that it is too expensive. However, this project is almost completed and once it is done it will be a great thing for residents of the city to go out and spend time on. If you would like any more information on the Rail Trail please go to www.ColumbiaGreenway.org and please help out this project as much as you can, it will be a great thing for our community!

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