



Map showing the the route of the canal system from New Haven in Connecticut to North Hampton in Massachusetts.

History - Even in Stop and Shop's Parking Lot

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Just as trains, airplanes, trucks, and cars have become the preferred method of transportation (for many reasons), so too the canal was once the up-and-coming mode of transportation for citizens and companies to use all over the United States. The success and prosperity created by the construction of the Erie Canal sparked interest nationwide for investors

to build canals and bring development to their own area. Westfield was one of those cities that has a history tied to these canals. In fact, the port of the canal in Westfield used to be right in the parking lot of Stop & Shop!

A New Haven businessman named James Hillhouse led the conversation of building a canal system that would run from New Haven, Connecticut to Northampton, Massachusetts. This system came to include Westfield along the way, as roads during the various seasons were plagued with thick mud, dust, and heavy snow that impeded travel and trading with other towns or cities. The canal system was an excellent way for New Haven to trade with other communities more inland and those that were not readily available to receive these goods due to the seasonal conditions on roads. Through funding of stocks, the Farmington Canal Co. and the Hampshire and Hampden Canal Co. obtained charters in 1822 and began the construction of the canals (McMahon 154-155).

The canal system, upon completion, extended eighty-seven miles of land. In the canal, the waterlink ran four feet deep and about thirty-four feet wide. Locks used water from feeder brooks, dams, ponds or other bodies of water that raised boats up or down ten feet. Aqueducts lifted the canals above the Farmington River, Little River, and Westfield River (Reach 15). Boats were most often towed along a towpath by horse using ropes, and sometimes oxen were used for towing cargo boats (McMahon 159-160). As soon as the Westfield canal reached completion in 1829, the city experienced a boom much like the other cities along the canal system. It enabled businesses such as hotels, taverns, and stables to thrive under this new mode of travel (McMahon 157). This system created an overall increase in businesses in town that flourished as a result of the needs that had to be met during people's stay in Westfield.

From its completion to the first use of the canal, many news reports captured the excitement of the citizens with great detail: “The boat slid into the water in fine style, amidst the cheers and acclamations of a large concourse of citizens and a number of strangers, which the novelty of the occasion had drawn together. The boat with about 250 on board was floated to the North Basin, when, after giving three hearty cheers to the prosperity of the canal, and the success of internal improvements, they returned” (qtd in McMahon 157-8). The construction of the canal brought great hope to the citizens of Westfield for the prosperity of not just the canal system, but of their town as well. New Haven shipped various products such as salt, oranges, codfish, molasses, copper, oil, tinware, oysters, and iron items using the canal system (Reach 15). From the north, they shipped products such as wood, cider, potatoes, turpentine, wheat, cheese, charcoal, and hemp to New Haven (McMahon 160).

Though largely successful and prosperous, the development of railroads eventually made the canal system obsolete. By 1847, the Farmington Canal Co. and the Hampshire and Hampden Canal Co., which had merged stocks in 1826, dissolved and discontinued canal operations. In its time of operation, the canal was the fastest way to travel and transport goods, but the development of the railroad competed with the canal for speed. Coupled with the financial difficulty in maintaining the canal, the canal also proved to be much slower of a trip compared to taking a train, and thus it faded out as a popular mode of transportation (McMahon 163-165).

The railroad even happened to have been built along the same route of the canal, and in some places they used the drained canal bed to construct the railroad. Now these areas have been repurposed by the Columbia Greenway Rail Trail for one to walk or bike on (“1830’s Canal System”). Even with a seemingly brief history, the canal in Westfield encouraged the city to

thrive and enabled the city to take the next step to use railroads as an even better use of connection to other communities.

The canal's brief existence has since been overshadowed by bigger and better things, but taking the time to observe that it was an integral part of Westfield at one point shows how each building, street, and any other land in Westfield has a rich history to it, with most of that history being left untold. Tom Mayes has written in his blog that, "the continued presence of old places [...] contributes to people's sense of being on a continuum with the past" (Mayes). Though the canal wasn't preserved as other historical buildings in Westfield may have been, just knowing about the history of the canal or standing in one of the many spots where it used to be can, according to architectural critic Paul Goldberger, "make us feel that we live in a better present, a present that has a broad reach and a great, sweeping arc, and that is not narrowly defined, but broadly defined by its connections to other eras" (qtd in Mayes). Today, the remnants of the canal in Westfield are hidden in plain sight; it may be that you've stepped foot on where the canal used to be - especially if you've been to Stop & Shop.

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