

The Greenways Connector

Connecting the Wachusett Community with Trails and Greenways

July 2015

Railroad Driven History of the MCRT's Sterling Spur

In the second half of the 19th century and well into the 20th, railroads were the dominant means of transportation throughout America, spurring new business prospects, creating opportunities for community and social interaction, and even relocating religious gatherings. This is the story of how a short railroad through Sterling, MA, brought about such changes here.

The 14-mile Fitchburg and Worcester Rail Line was constructed in the 1840s and opened in 1850, with a southern terminus at Sterling Junction. In the process, the Quag was created, as the railroad was built on a causeway across West Waushacum Lake.

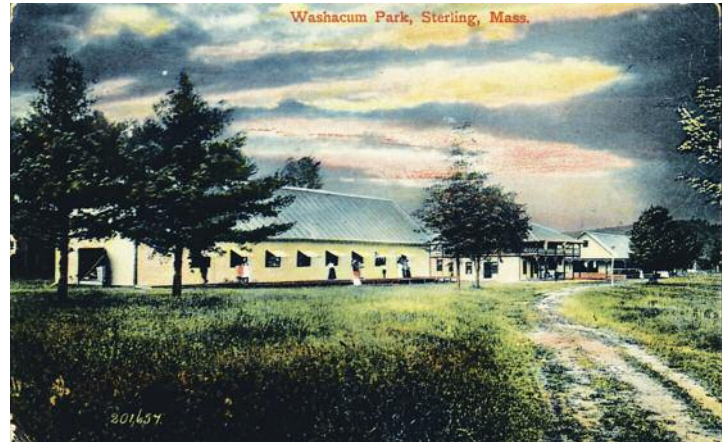
When you first arrive at the northern parking area for the Sterling section of the Mass Central Rail Trail (MCRT), the dominant structure that greets you is the Sterling Cider Mill. Founded in 1906 by Walter Hildick Sr., it took advantage of

Sterling's apple orchards and direct access to railroad transport. During its heyday, the mill produced 2 million gallons of apple cider, apple juice and cider vinegar annually. In 1936, the mill introduced a new product, sparkling cider, which was fermented under pressure and contained 3% alcohol. In the 1940s, however, the federal alcohol tax authorities ended that venture.

Sterling resident Jackie Provencher worked at the cider mill in the 1960s. At that time, she says, the mill shipped large numbers of 55-gallon containers of cider vinegar to California,

where it was mixed with honey and sold as a health tonic. According to Jackie, the tower structure housed a hide-away for the mill owner, Walter Hildrick, with space for an office and laboratory.

In the 1980s the cider mill halted its cider-pressing process due to environmental concerns, and in 1988 it finally closed down and moved operations to Pennsylvania. But the building soon gained a new lease on life as an artist and artisan community O My Gosh Antiques.



Travel south on the Sterling section of the MCRT to the bridge where the Quag and the West Waushacum Lake join. Today you experience the tranquility of forest and scenic vistas of the lakes. But around the turn of the 19th century, the setting was decidedly less peaceful: This was the location of the Waushacum Park Picnic Grounds, which offered visitors a wide range of amenities, including a dance hall, bowling alley, merry-go-round, baseball diamond, boats and canoes for rent, and a hotel and cabins for accommodation. The annual boat parade attracted more than 1,000 people!

The rail line made the park feasible. In 1879 the Fitchburg and Worcester RR built the Picnic Grounds, with a train stop located right at the entrance. Alternatively, if you arrived by train from Worcester to Sterling Junction, a short walk would take you to the Sterling Camp Ground, from where the steam



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20 Years of Partnerships

Twenty miles of the Mass Central Rail Trail (MCRT) constructed is the result of 20 years of partnerships with landowners. Wachusett Greenways is committed to the respectful use of all land where the MCRT and other trails passes, and we are grateful for the public and private partners who make the MCRT possible. Greenways Directors ask all trail users to join us in fulfilling the landowners' expectations and regulations for access to land and trails.



The Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) is responsible for many of the watershed lands that contain the MCRT along with many surrounding streams, ponds, old roadways and trails. The DCR has established Public Access Plans for watershed protection lands in the Ware and the Wachusett watersheds. The divide between the Ware River and Wachusett watersheds at the MCRT is at Glenwood Road in Rutland. The DCR has designated areas for walking, bicycling and enjoying nature. In

order to implement watershed stewardship, the DCR has placed signs in many areas to indicate uses that are permitted.

In the Wachusett watershed, the DCR has posted signs reminding users where bicycles are not allowed off the railbed. The DCR also designates additional posted bicycle trails. Dogs, horses and snowmobiles are not permitted anywhere on DCR lands in the Wachusett watershed.

In the Ware watershed, from Glenwood Road, Rutland, to the White Valley Bridge spanning the Ware River in Barre, bicycles are allowed on the MCRT and on many DCR-designated roadways. No single-track mountain biking in the forest is permitted. The DCR has posted signs indicating areas that are not open for bicycling. Horses are not permitted on the MCRT. The DCR does have other designated horse



trails in the Ware watershed. On the MCRT snowmobiles are allowed only on the White Valley Bridge

and on a single short section of the MCRT in Rutland between the two ends of Whitehall Road. Dogs are permitted on-leash, and owners must remove dog waste.

Please check the DCR website (mass.gov/eea/agencies/dcr) for Public Access Plans, or contact Wachusett Greenways through wachusettgreenways.org if you have questions about land use. Thank you to all who are serving as good neighbors and good stewards by respecting landowners' wishes.

Tangible Trail



Larry and Donna Espe have been long-time, generous Greenways members. Recently they were delighted to learn that they are eligible for a bench engraved in their honor on the MCRT due to their leadership contributions for the MCRT of more than \$5,000. "We are glad to support Greenways and delighted to see the tangible results of donating locally," Larry notes. The Espes selected a bench location on

the West Boylston section of the trail because "it's shady, a nice view, and close enough to the start of the trail that our 85-year-old mother and 3-year-old grandson can walk to it."

Wachusett Greenways Newsletter

The Greenways Connector

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For regular news updates, visit our website at www.wachusettgreenways.org.

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**Wachusett
Greenways**

Spotlight on Mike Perkins:

Exploring and Preserving His Beloved Central Mass.

Growing up in Barre, MA, Mike Perkins took to exploring the forests and streams around him from an early age. Using his father's old topographic maps of the area, which showed buildings from many of the old settlements, Mike and his father began hunting for them in the woods. Mike says, "Year after year, we discovered that building foundations and stone walls still dot many of those long-gone sites. It was pretty cool, trying to imagine what life was like back then living in small settlements often far from 'civilization.'"

Here's another of Mike's favorite memories:

Back in the 60s, my father would pile 4 or 5 of us kids into the car on a summer's evening and drive us up to Petersham, where there was a restaurant that served ice cream. I'd always get peppermint stick.

Afterward he'd drive us around the back roads and point out various historical, scientific or random facts about the area. One time he asked us if we'd like to see the Nichewaug Shopping Center, which he made sound like a bustling hub of commercial activity. After driving for several miles over uninhabited back roads, we came to a crossroads in the woods, with no buildings or any signs of human activity.

"Here it is!" he'd announce, "the Nichewaug Shopping Center! The commercial hub of the Greater Nichewaug Metropolitan Area!" We did see a few squirrels, so I guess compared to the rest of the town it was a real hot spot.

Ever since then I've tried to work it into the directions when I tell people how to get to Petersham, as in "Take 32 North, go right onto Glen Valley Road, go past where the Nichewaug Shopping Center used to be, take the next left, follow that road until you come to the Babbitt Wildlife Sanctuary, take the next left if you want, then you're pretty close."

Mike, who lives in Charlton, works as a research lab administrator at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester. Ever the explorer, spare time finds him hiking and cycling the MCRT and other trails, and backroads of his beloved Central Massachusetts.

His inquisitiveness has led him to an intense interest in the history of the Mass Central Rail Trail (MCRT), the settlements that the old Mass Central RR once connected, trails that lead off the MCRT, and more. He's especially interested in the hundreds of varieties of trees populating our handsome forests. He explains, "We used to try to follow what was then a barely passable path overgrown with trees, brush and washouts. We figured it was an old rail bed, but we had no idea where it led. Now that it's a rail trail, it's a great way to explore the rich heritage and scenic environment all around us."

As a kid, for example, Mike discovered a blueberry patch on



the far side of Muddy Pond, in Oakham, which is near the rail trail. "It was always a boggy place, very mushy underfoot," he recounts. "The adventure of picking berries on unsteady ground made the berries seem that much tastier."

"We are so fortunate to be having this beautiful, public resource," he says. "Hats off to Wachusett Greenways for its vision and resolve to build the rail trail!" And kudos to Mike for helping to keep the trail in tip-top shape as a Greenways volunteer.

Teaching Garden Takes Root

A committee headed by Jeff Keay is planning a "Teaching Garden" at the Wachusett Greenways Welcome Center at 21 Miles Road, Rutland. This is an exciting idea and very much in keeping with the Greenways mission and values. "The project is still in the planning stage, but by summer's end, we might just see four 4' x 8' raised beds established," Jeff says.

The committee includes Jeff and fellow Greenways volunteers Colleen Abrams, Christy Barnes and Barbara Campbell, along with Nancy Nichols of the Rutland Council on Aging. They are seeking the help of other Greenways volunteers (3-4 initially) willing to give a day's worth of time to build the beds. Let's support this ambitious project and bring it to fruition! To get involved, please contact Jeff at jkeay23@gmail.com.

Amazing Youth and Community Partnerships

The Mass Central Rail Trail (MCRT) is in fine form this spring thanks in part to dedicated volunteer groups. Wachusett Greenways is so grateful for the infusion of youthful energy from our community partners!

On April 12, several families from Westborough synagogues joined us for a Mitzvah Day, devoted to community service and good deeds. They cleared leaves from the busy MCRT trailhead at Thomas St., West Boylston. "They did a tremendous job!" raves Wachusett Greenways Director Mike Peckar.

St. Johns High School of Shrewsbury celebrated its 14th annual Service Day and its third outing with Wachusett Greenways on Saturday, May 9. The large crew worked tirelessly clearing debris, logs and drainage on the Sterling section of the MCRT. Several students expressed their enthusiasm by commenting that this was a great bonding experience for the group and that they genuinely were happy to be of service.

The WPI chapter of Alpha Phi Omega, a 50-year-old national coeducational service organization is a perennial partner with WG. In April they cleared ditches along the Charnock Cut in Rutland. "We managed to get most of the cut cleaned up thanks to AΦO's enthusiastic efforts," reports Wachusett Greenways Director Jeff Keay.

Bancroft School, along with faculty advisor Jim Kamosky, worked with Greenways on April 29. The volunteers from Bancroft, an independent K-12 school in Worcester, raked leaves and cleared branches from the trail and cleaned drainage ditches on the West Boylston section. Says Jeff Keay, "The Bancroft students are very good workers, and had thoughtful ideas for the efficient clearing of the trail. They are a wonderful group to work with!"

Members of Rutland Junior Girl Scout Troop 30333 completed their group Bronze Award with exemplary work on the MCRT in Rutland at the Charnock Cut. Several girls also helped with hospitality and trail counts.





These groups, along with lots of individual volunteers, endeavor to keep the rail trail clean, beautiful and accessible. If you're looking for a volunteer opportunity for your club, workplace, school or family, why not join us on the rail trail?



Adventuring Together

Cynthia Henshaw, of the East Quabbin Land Trust, led a popular walk on a fine New Year's Day on the EQLT section of the MCRT in Hardwick/New Braintree. Beginning at the recently opened section of the MCRT in Hardwick and New Braintree, the group traversed east to Wheelwright and back.

After a tough, snowy winter, a group of hardy walkers joined Jeff Keay for a Full Moon Hike (Pink Moon) on the MCRT in Rutland on April 4. After watching the moon rise over Thayer Pond at 7:38 PM, the group hiked past an abandoned beaver dam to the Charnock Cut, then headed back to the trailhead. Refreshments followed at Miles Road.

On April 25 a group of explorers met Peder



Pedersen at Leominster State Forest to hike Parmenter Road and beyond along a quiet winding path. It was a beautiful day, with trees just starting to bud.

The Healthy Heart Trail at Moore State Park inspired a small group led by Jeff Keay to walk through the Park on May 2 to observe the early-spring migratory birds and the waterfalls pulsing under Enchanta Bridge.

Railroad Driven History of the MCRT's Sterling Spur

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yacht *Sterling* brought you across the West Waushacum Lake to the wharf at the Picnic Grounds.

The need for clean drinking water in Boston brought an end to the Picnic Grounds. In the early 1900s, West Waushacum Lakes was acquired by the Metropolitan Waterworks (now DCR), but Waushacum Park continued to operate until 1915, when all the buildings were razed.

But you can still visit the site of Waushacum Park. Just north of the Quag Bridge, a level area with a stone bench indicates the location of the train stop for the Picnic Grounds. Next, looking toward the lake, find and follow a trail along the northern shore of West Waushacum Lake. After about 1/4 mile, this trail loops back to the location of the train station. This trail is in fact a remnant of roads and paths from Waushacum Park.

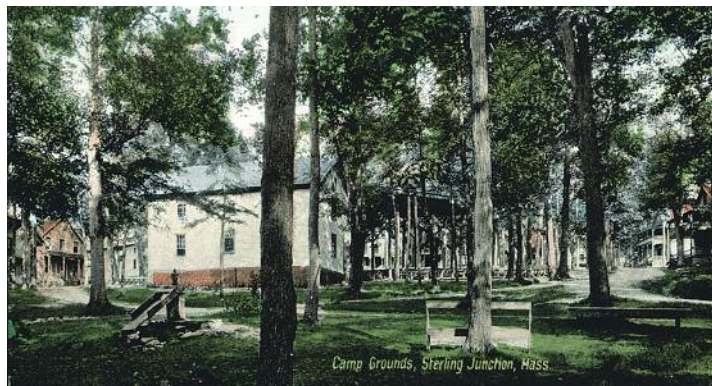
A hundred years ago, the Worcester Methodist District Camp (also known as the Sterling Camp Ground) could be found not far from the current trailhead at Gates Road. The camp moved here in 1852 from Brookfield, MA, primarily because of the existence of the railroad services, in



ENTRANCE TO STERLING CAMP GROUNDS, STERLING JUNCTION, MASS



Eagle Scout Zach Goodwin of Holden Boy Scout Troop 182 completed his Eagle project by placing triangular engraved trail markers on the MCRT every 0.2 mile from Glenwood Road, Rutland, to the Ware River crossing in Barre. Great job, Zach!



combination with the bucolic setting. They settled on land at the southern end of West Waushacum Lake, first leased and later purchased from John Gates, a local farmer.

What began as a tent camp became a settled community, with cabins, a community hall, tabernacle, store, bakery and restaurant. As the years passed, it expanded to include a number of Methodist institutes. Many factors contributed to the eventual demise of the Camp Ground, but the most severe blow was the 1938 hurricane, which hit in the afternoon of September 21, uprooting more than 400 trees and damaging many buildings.

The author wants to thank David Gibbs, Curator of Sterling Historical Society, for making information and photos available, and to Jackie Provencher for providing details of work life at the Cider Mill.

Ready to Volunteer?

Find Your Niche! Volunteers are vital to Wachusett Greenways' success. Come join us for service and fun. Here are just a few of the many rewarding volunteer opportunities we offer:

- ❖ Greenways Teaching Garden
- ❖ Trail clearing and maintenance
- ❖ Springdale Mill Historic Site Committee
- ❖ Mass Central Rail Trail (MCRT) Task Force
- ❖ Hospitality
- ❖ Mailing team
- ❖ Trailhead plantings
- ❖ Trail patrollers
- ❖ Grant writing
- ❖ Communications outreach, such as our newsletter and website
- ❖ Event leader
- ❖ Bulletin boards keeper

Ready to help? Please contact Colleen Abrams at 508-829-3954, or colleen.abrams@verizon.net.



COME ON OUT FOR FUN EVENTS

Enthusiastic event leaders look forward to your participation!

Bike Ride in Sterling Monday, August 3, 11 a.m. – 1 p.m.

Join Margaret Lock on the Sterling section of the rail trail followed by a ride on back roads. The pace will be leisurely, but there are some hills. We'll take an easy route to Sterling town beach, where we'll have a picnic lunch, then ride to Rota-Spring Farm for ice cream. Bring helmets, water and a packed lunch. Call Margaret to register at 978-422-9720.

Trout Brook Walk Friday, August 14, 10 a.m. – noon

Enjoy a relaxed walk at Trout Brook Reservation in Holden. We'll explore just a few of the 10 miles of trail here. Bring a picnic lunch. Contact Colleen Abrams to sign up at 508-479-2123 or colleen.abrams@verizon.net.

Hiking Sholan Farm in Leominster Saturday, September 12, 10:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

Sholan Farm and the surrounding conservation land provide a diverse environment of meadow, forest, farm land and lakes. There's a good chance we'll spot wildlife such as beavers, wood ducks, herons, rabbits and many types of songbirds. The hike will be moderate, following trails on the farm as well as a section of the Monoosnoc Trail. After the hike you have the opportunity to pick your own apples at the farm. Contact Jeff Keay at jkeay23@gmail.com to sign up and get directions.

Springdale Mill Celebration Saturday, September 26, 11 a.m. – 2 p.m.

All are invited for games, music, food, fun and more! Our third annual Journey to the Mill for children starts at 11 a.m. from the West Boylston entrance of the Mass Central Rail Trail, 1.5 miles to the Springdale Mill site. Register children for the walk/bike to the mill at colleen.abrams@verizon.net or 508-479-2123.

Sholan Point Hike, Wachusett Reservoir Saturday, October 31, 10 a.m.

Meet at Cheoy Lee's 2 Parking Lot, 45 Sterling St., West Boylston. This approximately 5-mile round-trip hike along DCR logging roads will loop through the Lily Ponds then over French Hill through mature white pine and oak forest to Sholan Point on a remote shore of the Wachusett Reservoir. Here you (and your kids) can scramble over this rocky knoll to get million-dollar views of the reservoir looking west, south and east. Bring your own lunch and your camera. Contact Mike Peckar at 508-835-2959 to sign up.

Check wachusettgreenways.org
for new event listings.

Members Make a Difference

In 2014, Wachusett Greenways' membership rolls grew to an all-time high of 912. We've now set our sights on reaching the 1,000-member benchmark in 2015, and in June we reached the halfway mark with 500 sign-ups, including 28 new members. You can check to see whether your 2015 membership is current by looking at the top right corner of your address label to see your last year of membership.

Help us celebrate 20 years of connecting the Wachusett community with trails and greenways by becoming a member today!



Greenways Annual Meeting 2015: Celebrating 20 Years

Wachusett Greenways members gathered on April 29 at the Holden Senior Center for festive fellowship over a delicious potluck supper, followed by our annual meeting. President Colleen Abrams gave an impromptu account of how Wachusett Greenways came into being 20 years ago. Greenways directors Colleen Abrams, Christy Barnes, Steve Chanis, Dave Fitzpatrick, Jeff Keay and Mike Peckar were elected and thanked for their continued service.

Retiring Greenways Director Gordo Elliott received a Golden Spike award in recognition of his longtime dedication. Gordo will still be a familiar sight as he continues to serve as a trail volunteer.

Team leaders stood to accept Greenways' appreciation: Viv Ouellette (newsletter), Hank Ouellette (photography), Ken McDonnell (ConstantContact and other outreach), Rachel



Peckar and Emmy Carr (new website and Facebook), S. Jane Arntz (mailing team), Colleen Abrams (hospitality), Pat Hackett (trail patrol), Christy Barnes (Welcome Center and events), Jeff Keay (Welcome Center teaching garden), Paul Hennessey (trail patrol), Gordo Elliott (trail clearing), and Ruth Spaulding (Springdale Mill Committee).

Springdale Mill Committee members Ruth Spaulding, Janet Olson, Jim Lafley, Chuck Skillings, Ed Yaglou and Colleen Abrams each received a Golden Spike and mug in recognition of their service. Chairman Ruth thanked her team and expressed satisfaction in reaching the 10th anniversary of the Springdale Mill celebration this year.

The Rutland Junior Girl Scout Troop 30333 members, led by Greta Gridley, spoke about their journey to achieve their Bronze Award as a Troop in service to Wachusett Greenways.



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