



EMPIRE STATE ADVENTURES

Trails, Resurrected Nineteenth-century corridors find new life as twenty-first century trails

by Robin Dropkin and Philip DeRita

In the mid 1800s, when waterways were the most practical and popular form of transportation, business tycoons such as Cornelius Vanderbilt, John Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie pioneered a revolutionary form of commerce and travel—the railroad. By the turn of the century, the locomotive had surpassed the boat as America’s major mode of transportation. The railroad was the backbone of a thriving and expanding America, with almost 300,000 miles of tracks linking all corners of the United States. The New York Central System was easily the largest railroad in the country, with 10,000 miles of rail crisscrossing the Empire State.

With the advent of automobile and air travel, the economic viability of the mighty iron horse declined, leaving thousands of miles of abandoned rail corridors. These old rail lines, as well as earlier transportation systems such as canals, are now being resurrected as trails for hiking, bicycling, in-line skating, horseback riding, cross-country skiing, snow shoeing—even commuting.

David Lutz



Beautiful scenery awaits along this riverside trail in Manhattan.

New York State boasts one of the nation’s most extensive rail trail systems, and also one of the longest canal trail systems. Almost 1,000 miles of rail and canal trail wind across the state. These recreation corridors are so popular that another 1,000 miles are currently being planned.

Many uses, many benefits

Multi-use trails created from old rail and canal corridors provide a wide range of benefits. Growing numbers of people use them to walk and bicycle to work and play. Close-to-home rail and canal trails make it easier for people to stay fit and have fun in so doing. These “ribbons of green” also help protect open space, provide corridors for wildlife, and protect fragile riparian ecosystems.

Preserving New York’s heritage

Railroads and canals played an important role in the development of New York State, facilitating increased trade and westward expansion. Preserving abandoned rail corridors and canal towpaths as public trails offers future generations the chance to experience and learn about Empire State history. Trails also preserve these valuable corridors for possible future transportation uses.

Boon to tourism

Trails boost tourism by attracting visitors, extending lengths of stay and adding to the constellation of an area's attractions. Rail and canal trails breathe new life into small towns after the canal boats and trains stopped running, often acting as a focus of community pride and a means of preserving and celebrating what is special about a community.

Gentle grades or slopes

Do you like walking and bicycling, but not the hills? By definition, rail and canal trails are flat or have very gentle grades, making them perfect for senior citizens, young children, or people who just plain don't like hills.

Rail and canal trails can be found in every region of New York State and in all settings—urban, suburban and rural. Following is a sample of the many rail and canal trails across the state.

Canalway Trail (Lockport to Palmyra)

The Canalway Trail will eventually provide more than 500 miles of multi-use trails along the historic New York State Canal System, making it the nation's longest intra-state trail. Along the Erie Canal, this trail is now almost two-thirds complete; the longest continuous stretch begins in Lockport, about 10 miles east of Buffalo, and continues 85 miles to Palmyra.

Endpoints: Lockport, Palmyra

Conditions: 85 miles of crushed limestone and asphalt

Access: Parking is available in most of the towns and villages along the route

Highlights: Lockport Locks, the only road to go under the Erie Canal; many lift bridges across the Erie Canal; Schoen Place in Pittsford (specialty shops and restaurants adjacent to the trail)

More information: New York State Canal Corporation, 200 Southern Boulevard, Albany NY 12209, 518-436-3034, www.canals.state.ny.us/canal/trail. Guidebook available from Parks & Trails New York, 29 Elk Street, Albany, NY 12207, 518-434-1583, www.ptny.org

Cayuga Waterfront Trail

Started in 2002, the Cayuga Waterfront Trail will eventually be more than 10 miles long, following the shoreline of Cayuga Lake and the Cayuga Inlet in Ithaca from Stewart Park to Allan H. Treman State Marine Park.

Conditions (2006): 6 miles, paved

Access: There are many points of access at parking areas in Cass Park. The beginning of the loop is at the Cass Park Trailhead adjacent to Route 89 at the entry to the swimming pool and skating rink.

Highlights: Scenery! Lovely views of the Cayuga Inlet with active collegiate rowing and other recreational boating; views of Cornell University sitting atop East Hill; inlet overlook with planting and seating along the edge of the inlet; Miller Grove, a curving section through 30 river birch trees.

Tip: Take the "Walk Through History," a self-guided tour that describes the history along the loop trail.

More information: Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce, 904 East Shore Drive, Ithaca, NY 14850; 607-273-7080, www.cayugawaterfronttrail.com



Parks and Trails NY

Most trails are paved with flat paths and gentle grades. One can easily imagine the old steam trains traveling this path.



Warren County Bikeway

Assembled from old trolley and rail lines, the Warren County Bikeway is a great recreational resource.

Endpoints: Glens Falls, Lake George

Conditions: 10 miles, paved

Access: Parking is available in Glens Falls (on Leonard Street) and at Lake George Beach State Park in Lake George.

Highlights: Lake George amusements (mini-golf, paragliding, water parks), boat excursions, views of the Adirondack foothills, Fort William Henry Museum. The trail connects with the unpaved Glens Falls Feeder Canal Heritage Trail via a short on-road segment for a 17-mile trip.

Tip: First two miles from Lake George are uphill.

More Information: Warren County Parks & Recreation, 4028 Main Street, Warrensburg, NY 12885; 518-623-2877, www.warrencountypw.com

Harlem Valley Rail Trail

A paved path built on the rail bed that connected New York City, the Harlem Valley, and Chatham, N.Y. Years of advocacy on the part of local residents led to the opening of the first section of trail in 2000.

Conditions: 15 miles, paved, in two sections—Wassaic to Millerton, 11 miles; Copake Falls to



Get a feel for nature and history while you enjoy the outdoors.

Jim Clayton



Many trails are perfect for strolling, rollerblading, and skating.

Boston Corners, 4 miles

Access: Wassaic (Metro-North train station), Amenia, Coleman Station, Millerton, Boston Corners, Copake Falls (Taconic State Park)

Highlights: Level trail bordered by rolling hills, horse and dairy farms, wetlands with lots of wildlife, Taconic State Park, dramatic rock cuts, and occasional small villages.

More information: Harlem Valley Rail Trail Association, Box 356, Millerton, NY 12546; 518-789-3733, www.hvrt.org

Catskill Scenic Trail

The Catskill Scenic Trail lies atop the former rail bed of the Ulster & Delaware Railroad. Young and old alike will find this an easy and enjoyable route through the Catskill foothills. The Trail parallels the West Branch of the Delaware River and offers many delightful fishing spots. The trail is owned and maintained by the non-profit Catskill Revitalization Corporation.

Endpoints: Bloomville, Grand Gorge

Conditions: 25 miles, cinder surface

Access: Bloomville (north of Route 10), Stamford, Grand Gorge (depot on Railroad Ave.)

Highlights: Wooded, Catskill views, several fishing access spots, nearby scenic rail ride along West Branch of Delaware River.

More information: Delaware & Ulster Railroad, P.O. Box 310, Stamford, NY 12167; 607-652-2821, www.durr.org

Manhattan Waterfront Greenway (west side)

This trail on Manhattan's west side is one of the premier multi-use trails in the state. Stretching from Battery Park to Fort Tryon Park near Dyckman Street, it features the Manhattan skyline on one side and the glistening Hudson River on the other. One section that's especially good for children is between Riverside Park (near Riverbank State Park) and the Little Red Lighthouse under the George Washington Bridge, made famous in the children's book *The Little*



Rick Manning

Many trails wind around landscaped gardens with views of the Cayuga Lake Inlet.

Red Lighthouse and the Great Gray Bridge. The west side greenway trail is the longest continuous segment of the 32-mile bicycle/pedestrian path planned for the perimeter of Manhattan.

Endpoints: Battery Park, Fort Tryon Park

Conditions: 12 miles, paved

Access: Battery Park, Fort Washington Park, many cross streets, including Gansevoort, 15th, 46th and 59th St, 155th St., 181st St, Dyckman Street and Riverside.

Highlights: Views of the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, and the George Washington Bridge, Chelsea Piers, U.S.S. Intrepid Museum, Grants Tomb, Riverbank State Park, Audubon Terrace, the Cloisters Museum. And, simply being on a car-free path in the middle of bustling Manhattan.

Tip: Crowded on weekends; mid-day on weekdays is best. There is one short on-road section between 129th and 133rd.

More information: The Arsenal, Central Park, 830 5th Avenue, New York, NY 10021.

In NYC, dial 311 for all Parks & Recreation information, outside of NYC, 212-NEW-YORK, www.nycgovparks.org

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If You Go

Tips for enjoying the trails



Rail and canal trails accommodate many users, which is one of their greatest benefits. However, different users on the same trail can occasionally lead to conflicts. The cornerstone of multi-use trail etiquette is “wheels yield to heels.” Bicyclists and in-line skaters yield to other users, pedestrians yield to equestrians.

Some other guidelines:

- Obey all posted rules.
- Stay to the right except when passing.
- Pass on the left.
- Yield to oncoming traffic when passing.
- Give clear warning signal when passing. For example, call out, “Passing on your left.”
- Travel at a reasonable speed.
- Keep pets on a leash.
- Do not trespass on private property.
- Do not leave any litter behind.
- Move off the trail surface when stopped to allow others to pass.
- Yield to other trail users when entering and crossing the trail.
- Don’t disturb any wildlife.

Online trail guide

TrailFinder Maps, an online guide to more than 90 rail trails, canal trails, greenways, bikeways, and riverwalks in New York State, is available at www.ptny.org, the Parks & Trails New York website.

