

A Brief History of the Hudson Valley Rail Trail

By Claire R. Costantino and Joe Bigelow

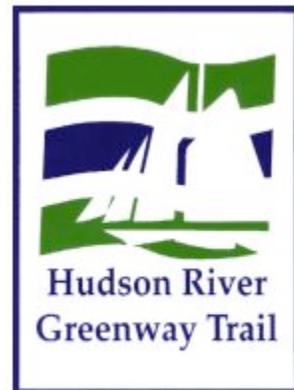
Lying quietly to the west of the mighty Hudson River in the Mid-Hudson Valley is a quiet jewel stretching lazily from the hamlet of Highland westward toward New Paltz. The sun sparkles off the nearby creeks and ponds, the forest climbs the surrounding Illinois Mountain and the pleasures of enjoying the tranquil beauty and splendor of the countryside on a broad and level pathway await you.

This pleasant family friendly boulevard thru nature is better known as the Hudson Valley Rail Trail, created, supported and maintained by the forward thinking people of the Town of Lloyd in Ulster County. The trail will stretch 7.5 miles, from its connection to the Walkway Over the Hudson in Highland and meanders up and through the hamlet of Highland then heading west joining up with Route 299 and terminating at South Street near the New Paltz Town Line when complete.

You will be able to reach its beginnings from the Walkway Over the Hudson in 2010 and follow it along it's full length, stopping for lunch in Highland or sitting out at the Black Creek dangling your feet in the cooling waters as they ripple past.

Developed in part with funds from the Hudson River Valley Greenway, the trail through Lloyd's story is actually rather more intriguing, filled with high finance and high technology. It's the story of a town unfazed by corporate pressures.

Way back in the 70's the railroads stopped using the right-of-way after the bridge to Poughkeepsie partially burned. The absolute cause of the fire is unknown, but it was a happy circumstance for the railroad as it allowed them to break the links across to Connecticut where they had to share rates. From that point on, rail traffic headed north to Albany before heading to the east into New England. Both the right-of-way and the old bridge fell quickly into disrepair, with the right-of-way eventually being taken over by Ulster County.



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In the years since, the bridge has passed into and out of various hands all hoping some day to develop it into a pedestrian corridor across the Hudson becoming a vital link in the trail system in the Hudson Valley. The five mile section of the old New York, New Haven and Hartford Line from the old railroad bridge west to Route 299 was deeded to the Town of Lloyd after the County was able to recover back taxes by selling off the chunks leading to New Paltz and other pieces to local utility companies. And there it sat, the Town of Lloyd not knowing how or what to do with it, it needed to be developed into a trail.

Now here's where high technology comes in. Unwittingly, right now, you are what turned into a piece of the solution. In the mid-90's fiber optic backbones began to be installed up the NY State Thruway corridor to accommodate the demand for high speed access across the Information Super Highway. To get from the Thruway across to Poughkeepsie they were going to have to follow Route 299, then down Route 9W and across the Mid-Hudson Bridge.

But wait! There was a shortcut! The old railroad right-of-way! It would shave miles off the route and save many hundreds of thousands of dollars to the corporation. So they approached the Town of Lloyd to acquire an easement offering a few tens of thousands of dollars in compensation. Luckily there were some pretty savvy business people on the Town Board so they entered into negotiations after months of which they finally arranged for \$400,000.00 as compensation for the easement!

The corporation was happy, (sorta), and the citizens of Lloyd were happy; they had the funding necessary to bring to reality their Hudson Valley Rail Trail. Within two years the first section, the 2.5 miles starting in the hamlet of Highland and heading west to Tony Williams Town Park, was cleared through the efforts of local citizens and Highland Rotary Club members, old ballast stone was removed and the trail officially opened in 1997.

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Ray Costantino, a member of the Highland Rotary Club and Community Service Project Chairman, brought the idea of converting the abandoned rail bed into a rail trail to the membership of the Highland Rotary Club. Two other Highland Rotary Club Members, Everton Henriques and John Canino embraced the idea and lent their support to the project and the creation of the Hudson Valley Rail Trail Association, which was named by the Town of Lloyd Town Board to serve as managers of the newly created Hudson Valley Rail Trail.

Everton Henriques was elected the first president of the Hudson Valley Rail Trail Association, followed by Ray Costantino who served from May 2003 to December 2007. Claire Costantino became president in December 2007. These three presidents share a common thread. All three were presented with "Conservation Hero" Awards from the National Parks Service for their work with the development of the Hudson Valley Rail Trail.

Today, plans are well underway for the further development of the two ends of the trail. Although "officially" undeveloped, the section from the Walkway Over the Hudson into the hamlet is passable and takes you from the old railroad bridge and under Route 9W straight to the edge of downtown Highland at Vineyard Avenue. At Route 9W there are a number of excellent restaurants immediately adjacent to the trail, fast food and other convenience stores and deli's. Located in the hamlet are cafes, pizza shops, pubs, restaurants, antiques galleries and all the other things you might need along your walk. In the near future a foot bridge will be constructed over Vineyard Avenue to create a completely unimpeded trail to the hamlet. This section of the trail has received funding and final design approval. It is expected to open in 2010.

About a mile west of the hamlet you will come upon the Hudson Valley Rail Trail Depot which houses the Highland

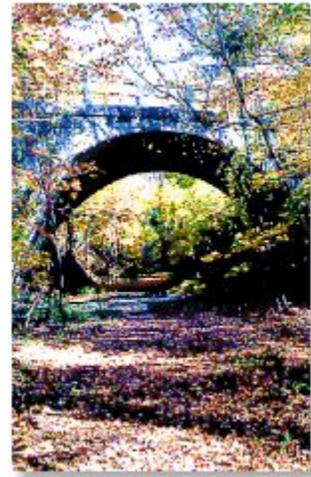
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Rotary Pavilion and restrooms. Alongside the Depot is an authentic 1915 caboose for your viewing pleasure.

As you leave the hamlet heading west on the developed portion of the trail, the old rail bed starts cutting thru rock outcroppings and hillsides creating dramatic canyons and cool shaded passes. The trees hang heavily overhead as the trail heads arrow straight to the northwest for about a mile. As the trail approaches the New Paltz Road it starts a lazy bend to the west until it passes under the road and then heads arrow straight towards the west.

Once past New Paltz Road the land starts falling away, Illinois Mountain, to your left and behind, is giving way to the valley and Black Creek Wetlands Complex. The old rail bed keeps level as the valley falls slowly away. At the crossing of Black Creek the rail bed is about 20 feet above the valley providing you an extraordinary vista across the valley back to Illinois Mountain and north across the beaver bog toward the Catskills. Black Creek is a Class A protected trout stream and access is extremely easy via the stairs to the creek. As you walk the trail, make plans to spend some time at Black Creek. If you have patience you may see beaver, deer and other wildlife in addition to the hundreds of birds that use the bog as their home.



From the trail looking across at Illinois Mountain you will see an even older rail bed. This is the original location of the rail bed from the early days in the 19th century. If you are really adventuresome go back up the trail a little and scramble down the embankment and follow the old rail bed out into the bog where you will have an exceptional view of the trail, the creek and Illinois Mountain. Take the trailside lunch you purchased back

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in the hamlet and have a picnic, dangle your feet in the creek and soak up some sun.

Continuing on to the west you will come to Tony Williams Park in about another half mile. It's a large park with ball fields, tennis courts, basketball, pavilions and restrooms. As the trail has been developed it has become a major route for kids on bikes to get between the hamlet and the park and on a busy spring, summer or fall afternoon there is laughter and the crunch of rocks as the bikes go back and forth.

Once you've reached the park you've also reached the end of the developed portion of the trail. But the best is still waiting for you! Beyond the park the trail becomes more densely overgrown and the trees completely envelop the trail creating a mile long arbor of dense shade with occasional skylights revealing shafts of sunshine penetrating the canopy. It's a seemingly magical place of hills, dense stands of trees and chipmunks scurrying thru the leaf clutter.



About half a mile or so further along when the Black Creek passes back under the trail stop and look closely at the bridge you are on top of. Better yet, go down the embankment and give it a real look, it's a totally unique structure in the Hudson Valley as it's a double bridge. It carries the rail bed over the creek and an old farm road under the rail bed and over the creek. Sound confusing? The reality isn't. It's a sublime and simple solution to a thorny logistic situation. Past the bridge the creek cascades over a series of rocks and pools in the dense shade, pausing momentarily before it continues.

A half mile or so further you emerge from the arbor out into the bright sun where the New Paltz Road meets up with Route 299 heading west to New Paltz. This westward portion of the trail has received funding and is expected to open Fall 2012.

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Along the "developed" portion of the trail there are four parking areas specifically for accessing the trail; in the hamlet, at the Hudson Valley Rail Trail Depot located at 101 New Paltz Road and at Tony Williams Park. In addition at the western terminus on New Paltz Road there is also a parking area.

At full development the Town plans on having a 12 foot wide strip of asphalt, with a 12 foot wide adjacent soft surfaced strip, leading from the Walkway Over the Hudson all the way to the intersection of South Street and Route 299.

The Hudson Valley Rail Trail is a very easy family friendly walk. With the opening of Walkway Over the Hudson in October 2009, the Hudson Valley Rail Trail will connect to trails in Dutchess County creating a network of approximately thirty miles of trail. With any luck, the Hudson River Valley Greenway will be able to assist in the further development of connecting trails from the eastern end of the Mid-Hudson Bridge providing scores of miles of uninterrupted pedestrian and low impact sports access stretching from Westchester, through Highland connecting with the vast trail system in the Shawangunks and up into the Catskills.

The Hudson Valley Rail Trail encourages walking, biking, horses, roller skates, rollerblades, cross country skiing and snow shoeing during daylight hours. Along the trail you are encouraged to slow down and observe the animals, birds and plants around you; breathe deeply of the fresh air and tranquility; take a moment or two to reacquaint yourself with the beauty of the Hudson Valley and enjoy this very special access into the landscape.



Motorized vehicles, alcoholic beverages, open fires and camping are not allowed along the trail. And please remember to be considerate of others on the trail and responsible by bringing off the trail anything you take onto the trail. The Hudson Valley Rail Trail is a Carry In/Carry Out trail.

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You can obtain a map and information and help support the development of the Hudson Valley Rail Trail as a recreational amenity and economic development tool for the hamlet of Highland and Town of Lloyd by writing to: Hudson Valley Rail Trail Association, 12 Church Street, Highland, New York 12528 or by visiting hudsonvalleyrailtrail.net.