

# The Air Line Railroad Trail

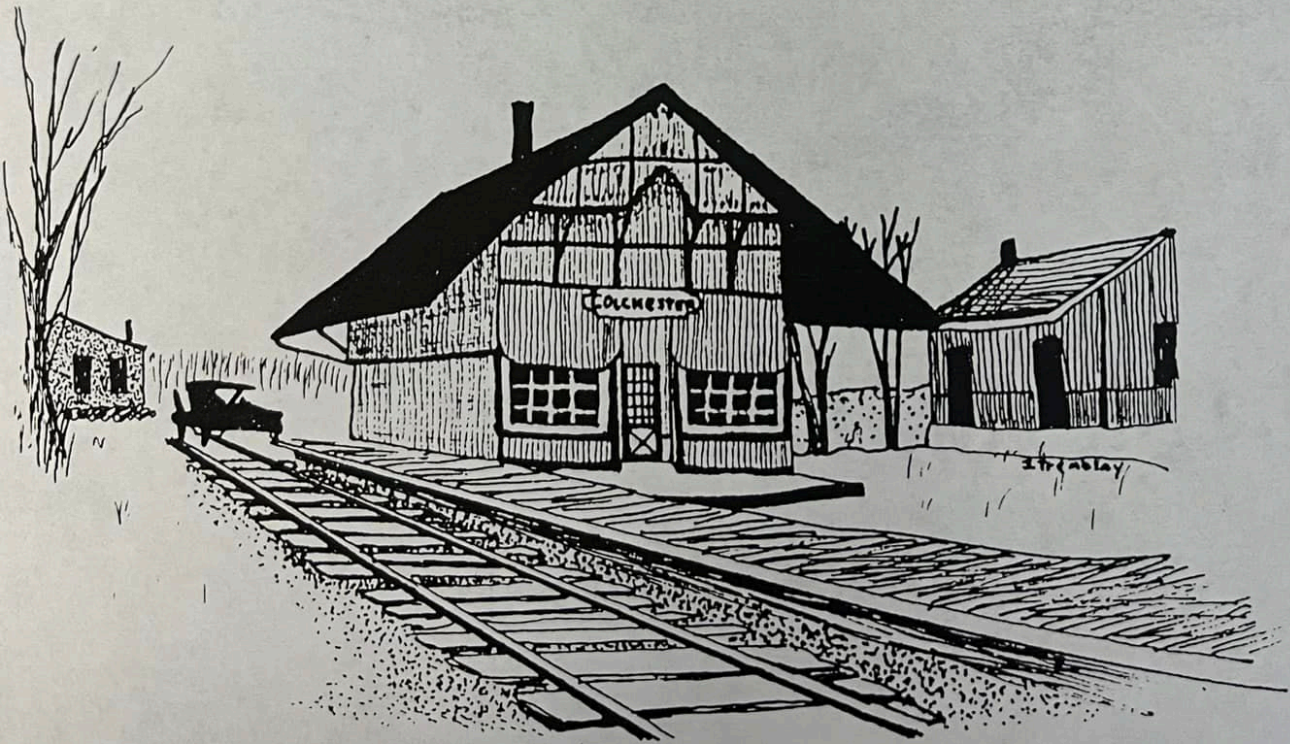
by Jennifer Tremblay



Many thanks to Marie Knutsen, whose effort, energy and inspiration made this project possible. Her dedication to the Girl Scout program has touched the lives of many people.

Special thanks also to Loren Marvin and Jay Hansen for their help and contributions to this project.

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## The Airline Railroad Trail

There is a grassy path that runs from New Haven to Willimantic. Birds chirp and breezes blow in the quiet valleys. But once, these valleys echoed with the sound of train whistles.

This path is all that remains of the Air Line Railroad. Today, this rail trail is owned by the State of Connecticut and is known as the Air Line State Park Trail. It's under the custody and control of the Department of Environmental Protection, for use in recreational purposes only.

The Air Line Railroad was designed to be a shortcut from New York to Boston, through the hill country of Connecticut. It was completed in 1875. The Air Line was an important part of Connecticut's history, linking the small towns in the area with the larger cities and improving shipping and transportation. The trains brought wealthy New Yorkers to the numerous resorts in East Haddam, East Hampton and Moodus. Many East Hampton students traveled the rails each day to Middletown High School.<sup>1</sup> The Air Line had its share of famous trains, among them the Ghost Train, a luxury train painted completely white with gold trim. Colchester decided to have a spur of the railroad come into town,

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<sup>1</sup>Middletown Press, June 8, 1979



primarily because of the rubber factory that was there.

### THE HAYWARD RUBBER FACTORY

In 1847, Nathaniel Hayward came to Colchester and started the Hayward Rubber Factory. Mr. Hayward had invented vulcanized rubber (the process of adding sulfur to the rubber, which prevented the rubber from becoming sticky in hot weather).

Broke and desperate for money, Nathaniel Hayward sold the patent for his invention to a certain Mr Goodyear. This proved to be unfortunate, as he lost sole rights to his invention and eventually lost his company to the giant rubber trust which formed a generation later.<sup>2</sup> While his company existed, however, it put Colchester on the map. It was famous nationwide, at one time selling over one million dollars of merchandise annually. The factory also created a large number of jobs - it directly employed six hundred people. These job opportunities lured a large number of immigrants, especially Irish, to the town to work - so many, in fact, that in 1854 the Roman Catholic population had grown enough to warrant the building of the town's first Roman Catholic church, St. Andrew's.<sup>3</sup> As the town grew, so did its economy. Local farmers

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<sup>2</sup>It Was The Best of Times, Ronald Goldstein, March 31, 1984, Cragin Memorial Library



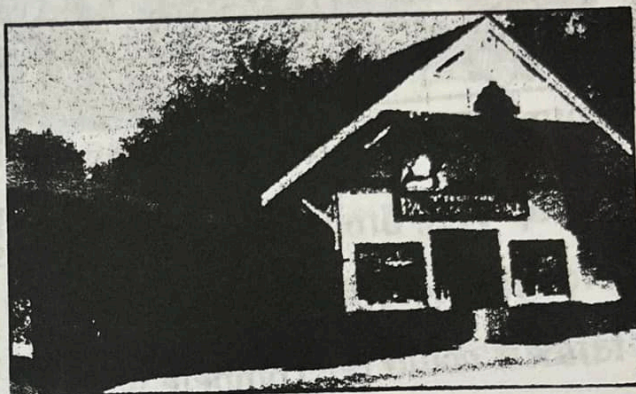
profited from selling lumber to the factory, which had a huge demand for fuel.

Meanwhile, the Air Line Railroad was being built. Because of the big business of the Hayward Rubber

Factory, it was proposed that a railroad spur be built into Colchester off of the Air Line. This was met with mixed reactions by the townsfolk.<sup>4</sup> A railroad in

Colchester would modernize the town and make shipping of the

Rubber Factory's goods cheaper and easier; at the same time, it would take business away from local merchants by making it possible to cheaply ship in goods from distant places. The positive seemed to outweigh the negative, however, and in 1876 the Town of Colchester appropriated \$25,000 to lay the track. (The town actually paid for only half of the spur's \$50,000 cost.) Money was raised for the railroad by the



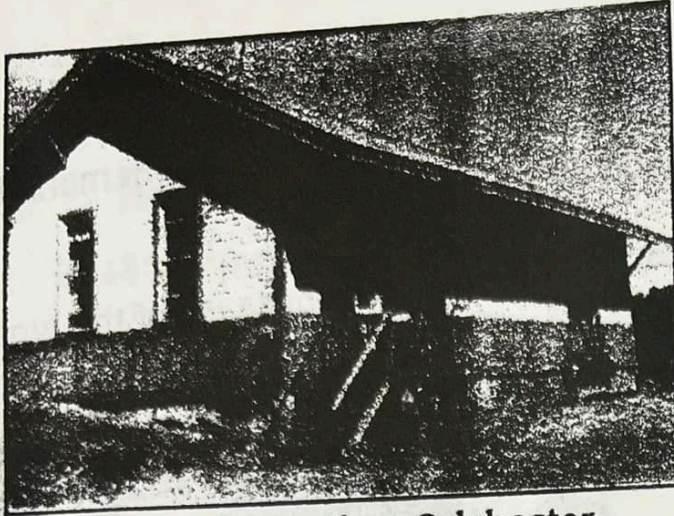
International Package Store,  
Colchester

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<sup>3</sup>New England in Transition, by Rev. Herbert Tompkins, 1933

<sup>4</sup>Loren P Marvin, Personal Interview, 1995





Former Freight Station, Colchester

sale of savings bonds.

Unfortunately, local farmers had been correct in their misgivings about the railroad. Hayward Rubber Factory, which had once stoked its fires with wood bought from the local townspeople, now had access to

cheap coal, brought by rail.<sup>5</sup> Grains, vegetables and other produce were brought in from western farms and sold at cheap prices that the local farmers could not compete with. As a result, several farms in Colchester failed.<sup>6</sup>

In 1883, the Rubber Company itself was forced to close. Business tycoons had discovered the worth of raw rubber and were monopolizing it, selling it at prices too high for the Colchester company to afford. At this point, Nathaniel Hayward had retired from his company, and in 1887, its new owners sold the business to George Watkins, a New Haven resident, who reopened the factory as the Colchester Rubber Company.

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<sup>5</sup>Loren P Marvin, Personal Interview, 1995

<sup>6</sup>It Was The Best of Times, by Ronald Goldstein, March 31, 1984, Cragin Memorial Library



However, the business was weakened. In the winter of 1892, the factory shut down for the holiday to do inventory and repairs. It never reopened. George Watkins had sold the business to the United States Rubber Trust.<sup>7</sup>

### THE COLCHESTER SPUR

Although the rubber factory was no more, the railroad continued to be useful for the town of Colchester and the surrounding area. It allowed the established Jewish population of Colchester to maintain their ties to New York and provided the city folk access to the area resorts and farmland.<sup>8</sup> In the early 1900's, the train hauled grain and chicken feed for the many chicken farms that existed in the area. In the 1950's it hauled tractors into town. With the arrival of trucking, the railroad was used less and less, and in 1961 it stopped running altogether.<sup>9</sup> In 1968, then First Selectman Loren Marvin purchased the Colchester spur portion of the railroad from the Trustees of the Property of the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad Company for \$7,000 dollars. Mr. Marvin

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid, 1984

<sup>8</sup>The Jewish Community of Colchester, CT, A Century of Modern Shtetl Living, by Seymour S. Weisman, 1995

<sup>9</sup>Loren P Marvin, Personal Interview, 1995



also has in his possession one of the original bonds sold to raise money for the railroad. The bond was issued to Peter Anderson, who passed it on to his grandson Andrew Boice Anderson.

Andrew, who lives in the South, came up to Colchester to visit his grandmother's grave and there met Loren P. Marvin, a cousin by marriage



A Lovely Section of the Colchester Spur

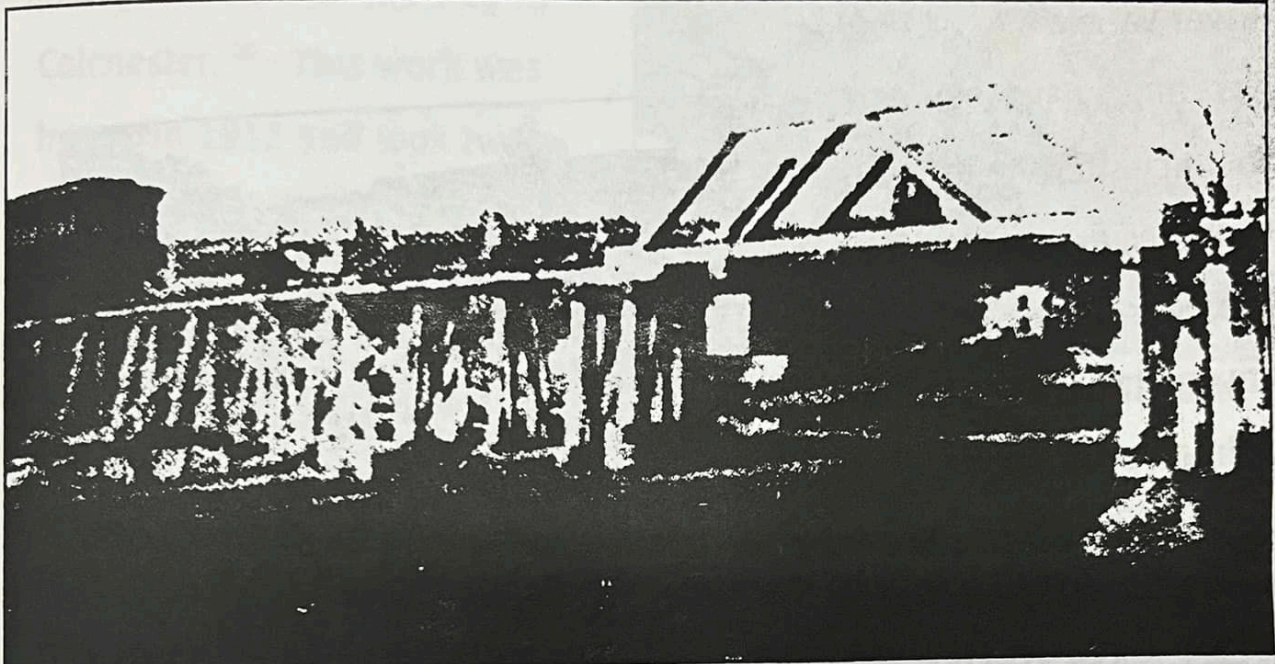
and the First Selectman who purchased the Railroad for the town. Mr. Anderson gave the bond to Mr. Marvin, who now has it in his private collection.

#### THE RAILWAY TODAY

The tracks of the railroad have long since been removed, making the railroad bed of the Air Line Railroad a popular hiking and riding trail. The Colchester spur begins at Lebanon Avenue in Colchester (Connecticut Route 16) by the International Package Store, which once was a passenger train station. Next to the package store is another old building, which was once the freight station to the railroad. There used to be a railroad trestle which ran over Lebanon Ave. to the place where the



Hayward Rubber Factory stood, but neither the trestle nor the factory building are there today.



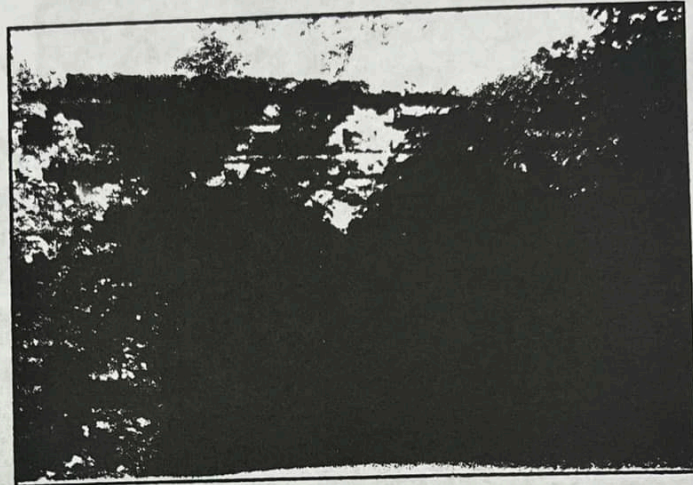
**Trestle over Lebanon Avenue** Courtesy of the Colchester Historical Society

From the package store, the path runs northward to the Amston section of Hebron (formerly known as Turnerville). It is about fifty feet wide, 3.53 miles long and contains 17.89 acres. It crosses Old Amston Road (Rte. 85) in Colchester near the old Amston railroad building, and Crouch Road in the Amston section of Hebron. The north end of the trail connects with the Air Line State Park Trail.



## THE AIR LINE STATE PARK TRAIL

From there, the trail runs northeast to Willimantic and southwest into Westchester-East Hampton. In order for the railroad to cross the Salmon River Valley, a huge viaduct was built, named Lyman's Viaduct after the railroad's first president. This viaduct is a definite must-see for anyone travelling the railroad path. Located a short distance from Bull Hill Road heading towards East

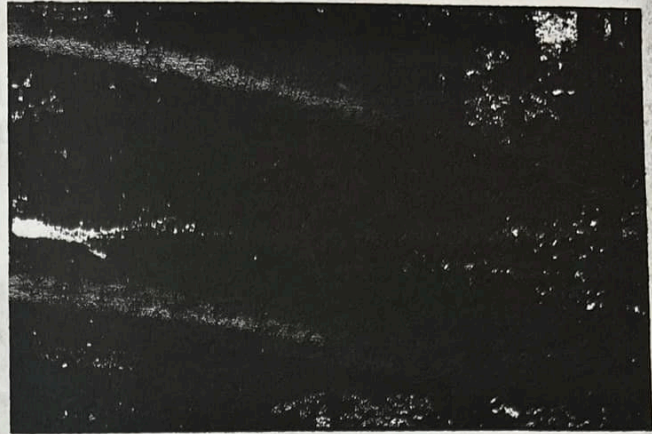


Bridge near Salmon River

Hampton, the trail-goer will see the path continue on a level plane while the surrounding valley drops suddenly, showing a breathtaking view of the countryside. Lyman's Viaduct once consisted of a network of iron beams and trestles which supported a double track some 137 feet above the valley floor and stretched for 1,100 feet. As time went on, however, the rails became unstable, and it was necessary for the viaduct's impressive beams to be reinforced and covered up with sand. Trainloads of Hooper cars filled with sand and cinders would drive out on to the viaduct and then open their bottoms, letting the sand fall through



the trestles to the valley floor below with a "thump" that could be heard all the way in Colchester.<sup>10</sup> This work was begun in 1912 and took two years to complete. After the structure was completely buried, a single track was laid over the space where a double



Stone Wall near the Lyman Viaduct

track once ran.<sup>11</sup> In some places, the sand and gravel have eroded so that you can see the original iron beams. There are also several paths which you can use to descend to the valley floor: if you hike along the valley next to the viaduct, you will come across Dickenson's Brook and the great concrete culverts which allow the brook through the sand mound. As the viaduct ends on the East Hampton side, there is a beautiful stone wall just off the path on the left hand side. Further down the Air Line trail is the smaller but still impressive Rapallo viaduct. In Westchester, there is also a bridge spanning the Salmon River, but it is

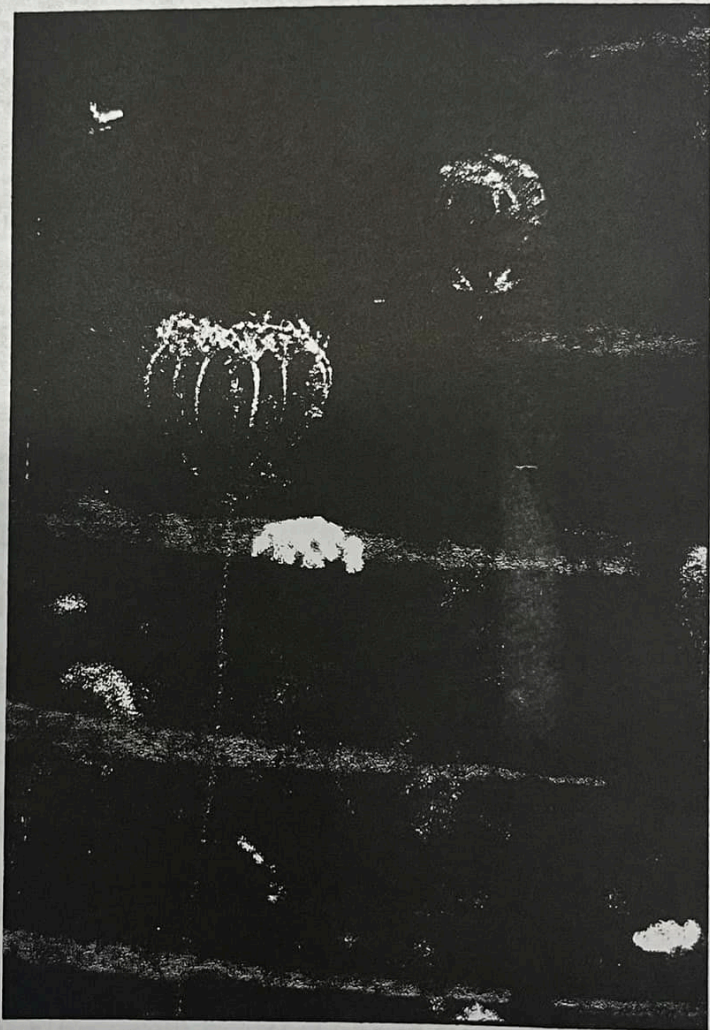
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<sup>10</sup>Loren P Marvin, Personal Interview, 1995

<sup>11</sup>Smith, Frank, The New Haven Register, Monday, May 17, 1948



not open to foot traffic as it consists of a network of steel beams and pipes. One can descend, however, and cross the river in several places. Although the rails from Colchester to Cobalt were removed in 1966, evidence of the Air Line is scattered all over the trail - pieces of railroad ties tossed along the side of the path, iron spikes and pieces lying here and there, hunks of coal and slag which must have fallen off the train on one of its journeys.



Queen Anne's Lace



Along the trail is a great variety of the flora and fauna which call this area their home. Birdwatchers, nature enthusiasts and quiet hikers may spot the birds and animals which live here. Some examples of the wildlife seen along the trail include:

### PLANTS

Wild Grape  
 Yarrow  
 Queen Anne's Lace  
 Golden Rod  
 Ferns  
 Asters  
 Wintergreen  
 Princess Pine  
 Wild Indigo  
 Northern Bayberry  
 Honeysuckle  
 Poison Ivy  
 Campion  
 Milkweed  
 Boneset  
 Jewelweed  
 Lady's Thumb  
 Wild Rose  
 Fleabane  
 Cardinal Flower  
 Raspberry

Pokeweed  
 Joe Pye Weed  
 Lichen  
 Thistle  
 Mullein  
 White Lily pads  
 Spotted Knapweed  
 Clover  
 Jack in the Pulpit  
 Bottle Gentian  
 Slender Ladies  
 Tresses

### TREES

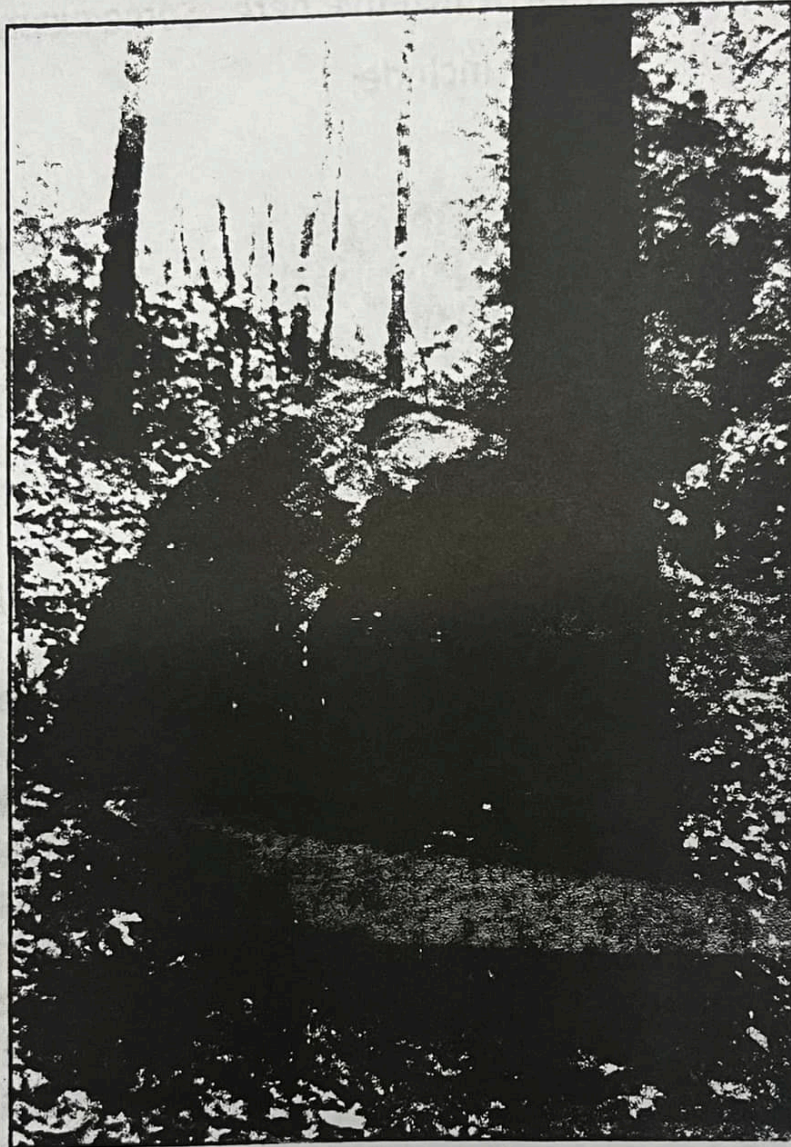
Cedar  
 Maple  
 Oak  
 Hemlock  
 Sumac  
 Laurel  
 Birch  
 Paper Birch

Wild Cherry  
 Sassafras  
 Blueberry  
 White Pine  
 Tulip Tree  
 Willow

### ANIMALS

Ribbon Snake  
 Star-nosed mole  
 Chickadee  
 Crickets  
 Grasshoppers  
 Squirrels  
 Chipmunks  
 Frogs  
 Toads  
 Woodpecker  
 Blue Jay  
 Bumble Bees  
 Yellow Jackets

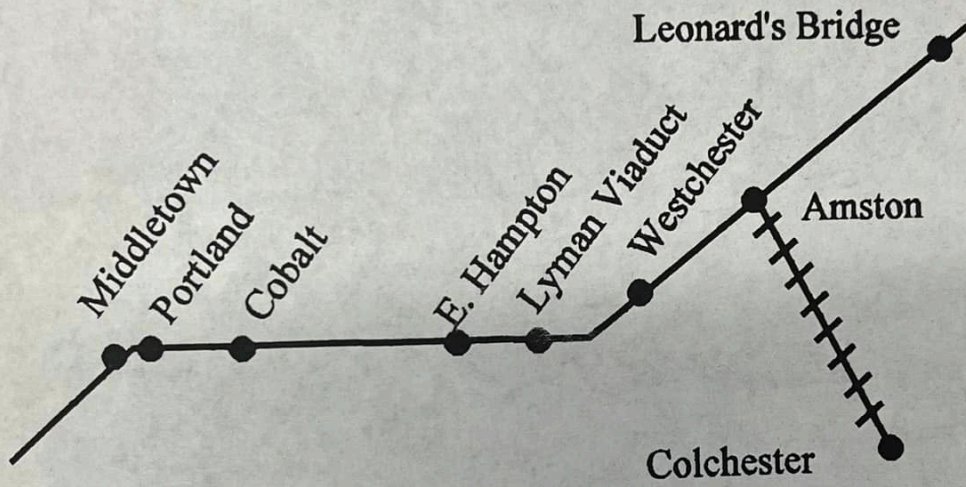




An Interesting Formation Along the Trail



### The Air Line Railroad



Partial map from: Connecticut Railroads, An Illustrated History © 1986



