Friends of Bedford Depot Park

Guide to the Narrow-Gauge Rail-Trail

U.S.G.S. Topographical Map • 1987

Narrow-Gauge Rail-Trail
3 Miles, Bedford to Billerica

KEY POINTS
1. Metal gates mark the entrance to the Narrow-Gauge Rail-Trail (NGRT) on Loomis Street, to the right of Pizza Express. The segment between Loomis Street and The Great Road is paved with asphalt. Page Athletic Field is on the right side.
2. Memorial Park and a retail district are on the right. The park is a pleasant place to take a rest.
3. The Great Road (Routes 4 and 225) was once called Main Street, a stop on the Billerica & Bedford Railroad (B&B). Please be cautious when crossing this busy street. The trail’s surface transitions to stone-dust on the northern side of the road.
4. Springs Road Crossing was once a passenger stop on the Boston & Maine Railroad’s Lexington Branch. Here, a unique type of electromechanical signal called a “wigwag” provided grade crossing protection to motorists.
5. The NGRT crosses Pine Hill Road.

Uses
Bicycles (hybrid and mountain)
Walking/Running

Surface
Paved asphalt; stone-dust

Significant Obstacles
Crossing busy Great Road; stone-dust is eroded in places near the V. A. Hospital.

Side Attractions
York Conservation Area: A trailside path will lead you on a nature walk through the woods.
Fawn Lake: This is the locale of the fabled Hotel Sweetwater. An adjacent pharmaceutical manufacturing company relied on the water of Bedford Mineral Springs, which was renowned for its “medicinal properties.” Property on the southern side of Sweetwater Avenue is now public conservation land.

Reprints of a circa-1901 Hotel Sweetwater marketing brochure are available at the Freight House for a small donation. It features many interesting old photos of this area. Take one with you when you visit Fawn Lake.

Friends of Bedford Depot Park offers this free rail-trail guide as a public service. No guarantees or assurances are expressed or implied. Travel is at your own risk. Exercise safety and use good judgment on your journey.

Version: 10/05/01

Billerica & Bedford Railroad ticket • April 6, 1878
(Courtesy of Billerica Historical Society)

Bedford is host to three rail-trails: the 11-mile Minuteman Bikeway to West Cambridge, the 4-mile Reformatory Branch Trail to Concord Center and the 3-mile Narrow-Gauge Rail-Trail to the Billerica town line. This guide covers the later.

The Billerica & Bedford Railroad was built in 1872 to connect Bedford Depot on the Middlesex Central Railroad with North Billerica Station on the Boston & Lowell. The “B&B” was the country’s first common-carrier two-foot-gauge railway. In 1885, the B&L built a standard-gauge extension of its Lexington Branch upon the roadbed. There were five passenger stations on this line: Bedford Springs, South Billerica, Turnpike, Billerica and Bennett Hall. The segment between Bedford Depot and Billerica Center was abandoned in 1962, and Bedford purchased the land within its boundaries.

Woods and residences border the NGRT. Most of the roadbed is surfaced with stone-dust. Hybrid or mountain-type bikes are recommended.
6. The Facilities Department for the Veterans Administration Hospital is on the right. The B&M used to deliver coal on a siding here for the power plant. After the hospital's opening in 1928, the railroad experimented with special passenger trains between Boston and the V.A.

7. Middlesex Community College and the hospital are on the right side of the trail. On the left is a path through the York Conservation Area; it can be an enjoyable side trip by foot. Beware of some sandy sections of the trail here.

8. This is the site of the former Hotel Sweetwater and the New York Pharmaceutical Company. The grand resort once attracted visitors from all over New England. Guests arrived by rail at Bedford Springs Station. This wooden “gingerbread-style” depot once stood on the right side of the track where now exists a dirt parking lot. Fawn Lake Conservation Area is a beautiful place for a side trip. Maybe you’re up for a walk along the path that circles the pond, or a picnic on the green. Private condominiums are on the northern side of Sweetwater Avenue.

9. New York Pharmaceutical Company shipped its products throughout the country from a Freight Shed that once stood on the northern side of the grade crossing.

10. To keep the roadbed level here, construction workers elevated the roadbed with “fill.” Often times, fill was obtained from dirt that came from “cuts” elsewhere on the line. Lt. Job Lane Elementary School is on the left.

11. Note the old stone culverts on each side of the right-of-way. Might these date back to the Billerica & Bedford Railroad?

12. A path on the left leads to Buehler Pond. Long ago, a Dr. Buehler maintained elegant Japanese gardens here. Some of the old stonework is still apparent today.

13. Raised concrete abutments mark the passing of a small stream beneath the roadbed.

14. The trail goes through a “cut” here.

15. On the right side upon a knoll, a chimney and foundation are all that remain of an old residence.

16. The roadbed becomes sandy as you approach the metal gates that mark the Bedford-Billerica town line.

17. A few wooden ties and a faded railroad sign greet you as you approach Springs Road in Billerica. South Billerica Station used to be here. Perhaps Billerica’s proposed “Yankee Doodle Bikeway” will eventually continue the trail northward—but for now, this is the end. A private street and a corporate parking lot were built upon the railroad right-of-way beyond this point.