

From Rail to Trail



End of the Line

The last train blew its whistle along the Rutland Railroad tracks in September 1961. Times had changed since the Island Line was built. Railroad workers joined unions and demanded better pay. The government built interstate highways. Trucks competed with trains to ship goods. More travelers drove automobiles long distances. The Rutland Railroad, like many railroads across the country, folded and abandoned its tracks. (Photograph courtesy of John Gardner.)



Rails to Razors

After the railroad abandoned the tracks, the line fell on hard times. Weeds grew high. Rails rusted. Few people visited the old railbed. The four turnstile-type drawbridges were dismantled in 1965. The Winooski River Bridge suffered the same fate in 1972. Local legend says that the metal was recycled to make razor blades. (Photograph courtesy of Laz Scangus.)



New Crossing

The Island Line is a lively corridor once again. Cyclists and pedestrians use the trail that follows the old railbed. Thanks to the Local Motion bike ferry, summer travelers once again can cross the Winooski River and keep traveling Vermont's famous Island Line. Seeking to provide a permanent, year-round crossing, transportation officials are working to build a new bridge on the abutments of the old bridge. (Photograph by Paul O. Boisvert, courtesy of Local Motion.)

How do you get a 136-ton train across the Winooski River? A century ago, the Rutland Railroad asked this question when it began planning the "Island Line," a 41-mile route linking Burlington and Rouses Point, New York. The answer was a steel bridge consisting of three 150-foot spans.

Crossing this river was only the first problem to overcome in building the Island Line. The task included the construction of several bridges and miles of causeway to link mainland Vermont and New York via Grand and North Hero islands. Incredibly, the work was done in just over a year!

The Flood of 1927 washed away more than 1,000 bridges in Vermont, including this one. Soon after the debris was cleared, Italian laborers settled here to build a new span. While the bridge they constructed is gone, some of their descendants still live in the houses on either side of the rail trail.

(Photograph courtesy of the Rutland Railroad Historical Society.)