

# Mahican-Mohawk Trail

Shelburne Falls Extension of the New Haven & Northampton RR. Later New Haven RR.  
Built in 1881. Abandoned 1923.

**Endpoints:** Hoosac Road in Deerfield to the South River and Bardwell Ferry Bridge in Shelburne to the South River.

**Location:** Franklin County.

**Length:** 3.0 miles total on both the north and the south sections. 1.5 miles on the Hoosac Road Section, and 1.5 miles on Bardwell Ferry Road Section.

**Surface:** Stone-dust, ballast and dirt.

**Map:** USGS Greenfield, Massachusetts. 24,000

**Uses:** all non-motorized uses, but hiking is probably the best way to go.

**To get there: South end of trail at Hoosac Road Trailhead:** From exit 24 on I 91, go north for 1.1 miles to Route 116 north. Follow this 1.7 miles until you come upon West Road. Turn right (north), and go 1.5 miles. Turn left, (west), onto Hoosac Road this is a dirt road. Go about 1000 feet and park at the small parking lot on the right. There's room for about 6-8 cars.

**North end of trail at Bardwell Ferry Road Trailhead:** Go to Conway on Route 116 and then turn right, north on Shelburne Falls Road for 1.75 miles and bear right at fork onto Bardwell Ferry Road for 2.75 miles. Park on left just before bridge. Walk back about 800 feet on the road you just came from and the trailhead is marked by a brown post with the blue-blazed Mohican-Mohawk Trail marker. Some home-made stairs will lead you down to the RoW which heads generally southeast from here. I do not recommend that you sample the trail north to the junction with the B&M railroad as it involves much flooded RoW and trespassing on private land.

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In the 1840s we saw the demise of the New Haven & Northampton Canal and later its resurrection as a railroad of the same name, it finally reached Northampton in 1857. After some acquisitions and mergers the NH&N became independent in 1869, but was still nick-named The Canal Line. Some extensions and branches were proposed so that more traffic could be generated and this trail is one of those extensions, the Shelburne Falls extension. [1]

This reason that Shelburne Falls was an attractive destination was because that community sat astride the Troy & Greenfield Railroad. You see, in the 1870s the State of Massachusetts was building the Hoosac Tunnel[2] and the state owned Troy & Greenfield RR was the gateway to the tunnel and points west out of New England. This attraction of a direct route out of New England was such a great temptation, that the directors of the NH&N authorized one of the most ambitious construction jobs in New England.

The route through Deerfield and Conway had not only some of the tallest fills on a railroad in southern New England, it had the tallest railroad bridge ever built in southern New England. It was opened to traffic in 1881 and met with some modest and growing success. However, in 1887, shortly after the Canal Line Branch to Turners Falls was built and opened to traffic, the State of Massachusetts sold the tunnel and the Troy & Greenfield Railroad to the Fitchburg Railroad (forerunner of the B&M). The Fitchburg saw no great need to help the Connecticut oriented Canal Line, especially in light of the fact that the Canal Line was in a position to siphon off traffic from Turners Falls that might be available to the Fitchburg.

Unfortunately, the Canal Line did not directly reach Shelburne Falls on their own track, but through the state owned the T&G RR, they provided a good and reliable connection on the track to town and points beyond to North

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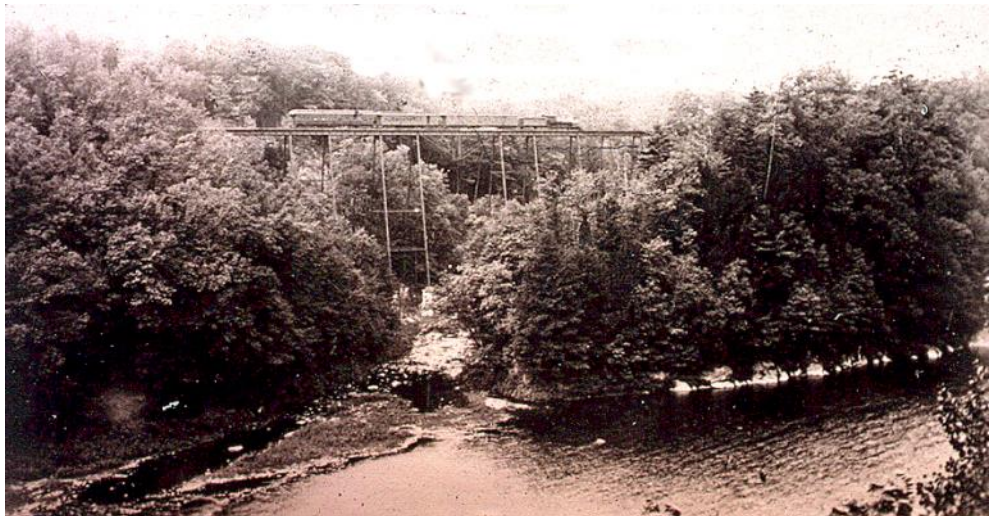
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Adams. That agreement changed however, after the Fitchburg took over and they instead provided trackage rights with a steep fee attached.

At this time in the later 1880s, the New Haven Railroad was the most ambitious, but cut-throat railroad in southern New England and they were warily eyeing the NH&N's expansionist activities in Massachusetts. Shortly after the opening of the Turners Falls Branch, the NH approached the major share-holder in the NH&N, Joseph Sheffield and made him what is commonly known today as, an offer he could not refuse.

Sheffield sold his interest, (at a premium price by the way), to the NH who then was able to lease the entire NH&N and get it under their wing. The NH then proceeded to slowly relegate the NH&N's route and lines into secondary status. Since they had their own gateway into New England at Poughkeepsie, the NH had no use for a connection to the Hoosac Tunnel and stopped all service on the extension north of Deerfield in 1923 and actually abandoning it at the time. The line north from Northampton to Deerfield was abandoned in 1943 and the track went into the war effort. The parallel running B&M was assigned the NH track to Turners Falls.

The trail today known as the Mahican-Mohawk Trail utilizes a part of the old NH's Shelburne Falls Extension from Deerfield to Shelburne, but the vast majority of the planned route of the M-M Trail will traverse known Indian paths along the Deerfield River and into the Berkshires and eventually beyond to the Albany New York area. This vision is one of a primitive hiking trail that celebrates the heritage of the American Indian and the great contribution to our culture they have provided.



Two folks have had key roles in the development of the trail. Ken Debuque of DEM was originally responsible for the construction of the nature trail component of the trail in the 1970s. And more recently, Lauren Stevens from Williamstown was the one most responsible for the vision that is today known as the Mahican-Mohawk Trail. This is an interstate trail that celebrates the heritage of both the New Haven railroads northernmost reach and the historic corridor of Indian migrations.

This trail can be challenging so be aware that there may be some blown down trees and the planned bridge across the South River is not yet a reality.

#### **Hoosac Road Trailhead:**

**0.0 miles: Marker 1:** This is the first of many plastic signs along the trail. Blue Blazes made of plastic, these will always be seen on the west side of the trail and this first one is duly marked Quad Marker 1. These markers denote ¼ mile of trail and correspond to a mapping effort by John Steinegen, who through a grant maintained the corridor on behalf of the Mahican-Mohawk Trail in 1999. From all accounts Steiney as he is affectionately called, was an angel in the forest who took his job seriously and the trails well kept appearance is a direct result of his hard work.

**0.1 miles:** Here you'll find a gate across the RoW. Meant to keep out vehicles it also has a sign (in November 1999), telling that this is a hunting area in the fall of the year and that you should wear 600 square inches of blaze orange to be safe.) With that said we now head out and find the first of a series of cuts. This one stands 15-20 feet tall and the electric company has come through and put in original ballast. This was done to support heavy equipment for a transmission tower rehab project in 1999. Normally wet and muddy, they have made for a drier and firmer surface, but 3 inch ballast is not a friendly surface to walk on for long distances. Luckily the ballasted sections are not too long. I would also expect that when done with their tower rehab project, the electric company will undoubtedly be putting a finished surface on the trail.

**0.3 miles: Marker 2** Into another cut here that can be muddy at certain time of the year. 25 feet tall on the left side and perhaps 18 feet tall on the right side. Still on quad two, the tower for the electric row is easily accessible next to the trail and the access road to it will lead to the more natural hiking trail originally built in the 1970s.  
0.6 miles: (Begin Quad 4)

**0.4 miles:** Began **Marker 3.** in the cut. Look for the ancient ties in the water, still intact. Look for spectacular 40 foot waterfall and a 75 foot high fill right away.

**0.6 miles: Marker 4.** Look for interesting culvert.

**0.7 miles:** Into a gently sloped cut and just after that is a nice box culvert.

**0.8 miles:** Just before **Marker 5** you'll find an interesting culvert. Here carries water from the left to the river way down below to the right. A nice vista of the river below can be had here as bump out on the trail has created a natural area to stop and take in the sight.

**0.9 miles:** Here lies an old box culvert that no longer has the topping stone, but instead has a modern wooden decked bridge. Somewhat primitive without side rails, it is nonetheless very, very strong.

**1.0 miles:** Tree on right is marked USGS in orange paint. Look for interesting box culvert in this area as well. **G**oing past **Marker 6** as you head down hill.

**1.2 miles:** A newly constructed road of ballast will lead you to a newly constructed monopole for electric transmission. Look for the nice water fall on the left as you continue on.

**1.5 miles:** End of the trail here and you will find the abutments for the old high bridge still here. In fact you will find an extensive network of stepping ties down to the water's edge.

Big fill 25 feet high on the left side and much taller on the right. Look for the hiking trail on the left which intersects the trail.  
right after the cut the trail leads out onto a fill.

### **Bardwell Ferry Road Trailhead**

**0.0 miles: Trail marker 13:** At the start of the trail here you'll notice that this area is also the intersection of the power lines and as usual where these are, you have large open areas. Looking across the river, you have very clear view of west bound trains and could be a perfect photo opportunity, if you are lucky as the Guilford RoW doesn't have all that many trains today and some of those are at night. Use the stairs made out of old ties and head south along the RoW. As you head south along the RoW you will see the remains of the road to what was at one time, the area of the real Bardwell's Ferry. This was operated by Gideon Bardwell and his descendants from 1784-1888. Look for the hand hewn rock cut to the high side on the right and a slope down to the Deerfield River on the left. Very observant hikers will also notice the very old monument marker laid in the Row by the original survey team circa 1885. 6 X 6 and sticking out of the ground only an inch or two, it is very easy to miss. A barbed wire fence is seen here also. At one time this crossed the RoW, but today it is open for trail users.

**0.3 miles: Trail marker 12:** You are also going into a cut that is wet times of the year and actually a stream sometimes utilizes the RoW. There is an adjacent higher trail cut in on the river side that makes for a drier hike.

**0.5 miles: Trail marker 11:** The trail bends to the right to avoid a washout ahead. When we passed through in early November 1999, the washout was still hikable, but unless fixed soon it was going to be impassable. You might wish to contact the trail organizers to make sure if it has been fixed. The washout involves a towering fill about 70 feet tall which has only 12-18 inches of treadway available to walk-on for about 150 feet. This makes for a bit of a scary passage. If it is still not fixed when you are passing through you might want to take the detour which starts near marker 11. This involves hiking to the south (right off the trail), for a short distance to the power lines and then into the forest and then turning parallel to your original direction until you spot the routing back to the original RoW. Not much of a detour, but it can be tricky. Just remember to spot the blue blaze of the M-M Trail.

**1.0 miles: Trail marker 10:** On a shelf again with steep down slope to the river and a steep up slope to the top of a hill. About 100 yards beyond marker 10, you will see a drain weir for drainage of the RoW. Pretty unusual to see this up here, but indeed very similar to NH&N RR construction in the Hamden-Cheshire areas of Connecticut.



cut. Shortly after you come upon a scenic water fall cascading down from the left and passing into an extensive culvert and out to the river below. Note the barbed wire fence that used to cross the trail. No longer blocking the trail, but just a reminder of what once was.

**1.3 miles: Trail Marker 9:** The RoW widens up here as you are now entering the old yard at Conway Station. Four tracks wide and double ended, this area also marks the interchange area for the Conway Electric Railway. The ruins of the station and the freight house are very much visible. The forest is growing up around the area and makes for an eerie scene. This area has much to investigate. If you stay on the original steam railroad RoW, you will very shortly come upon the piers for the crossing of the South River. If you take a parallel, but diverging and slowly descending to the right tread way, this is the RoW of the old Conway Electric Railway and you are headed to the crossing over the Deerfield River and the junction with the B&M RR. If you take the apparent road to the right which heads to the west, this is actually Depot Road and the RoW of the trolley to Conway proper. This is a public road and will lead in 1.5 miles out to Bardwell Ferry Road. My favorite route is to hike on the trolley RoW as it descends to get under the steam railroad line and swings sharply to the east. This is interesting also because the M-M Trail marker is found here as well.



**1.5 miles: Trail Marker 8:** The trolleys abutments for the crossing of the Deerfield River are still in place. Just before you get to the Deerfield River however, you will notice an interesting stone wall that provides a border to the trolley RoW as it crosses under the steam railroad line.

If you come by in the fall, or spring when the leaves are down, you'll be treated to a railroad archeologist's treasure trove of interesting tidbits. Looking closely on the trees (the oldest and largest ones of course), between you and the river, you'll see trolley guy wires and insulators still mounted right where they were installed. Pretty amazing considering they've been there for over one hundred years.

[1] In Massachusetts those branches became, Holyoke & Westfield RR in 1870, (currently operating today as the Pioneer Valley Railroad), Williamsburg Branch: operational until 1962, (the Williamsburg Branch is envisioned to become a trail in the not too distant future). Turners Falls Branch, opened in 1887 and components of this were operational until 1985. (Portions of this branch are scheduled to become Rail-Trail as well). Shelburne Falls Extension, also opened in 1887, but ran only until 1923.

[2] largest construction project in the world at the time and longest tunnel ever built for many years until a longer one was built in the west.