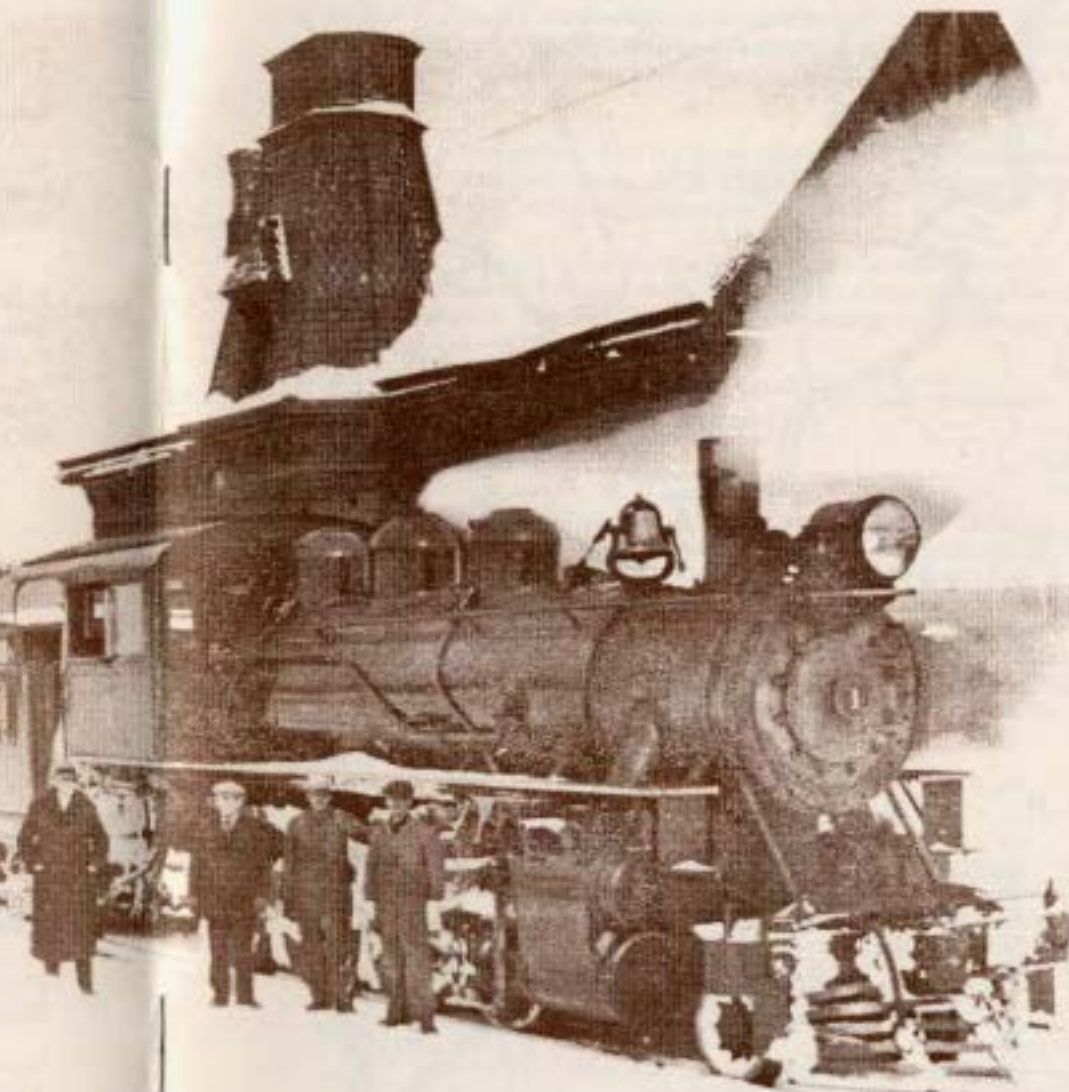


Brattleboro Railroad Station 1925. BP



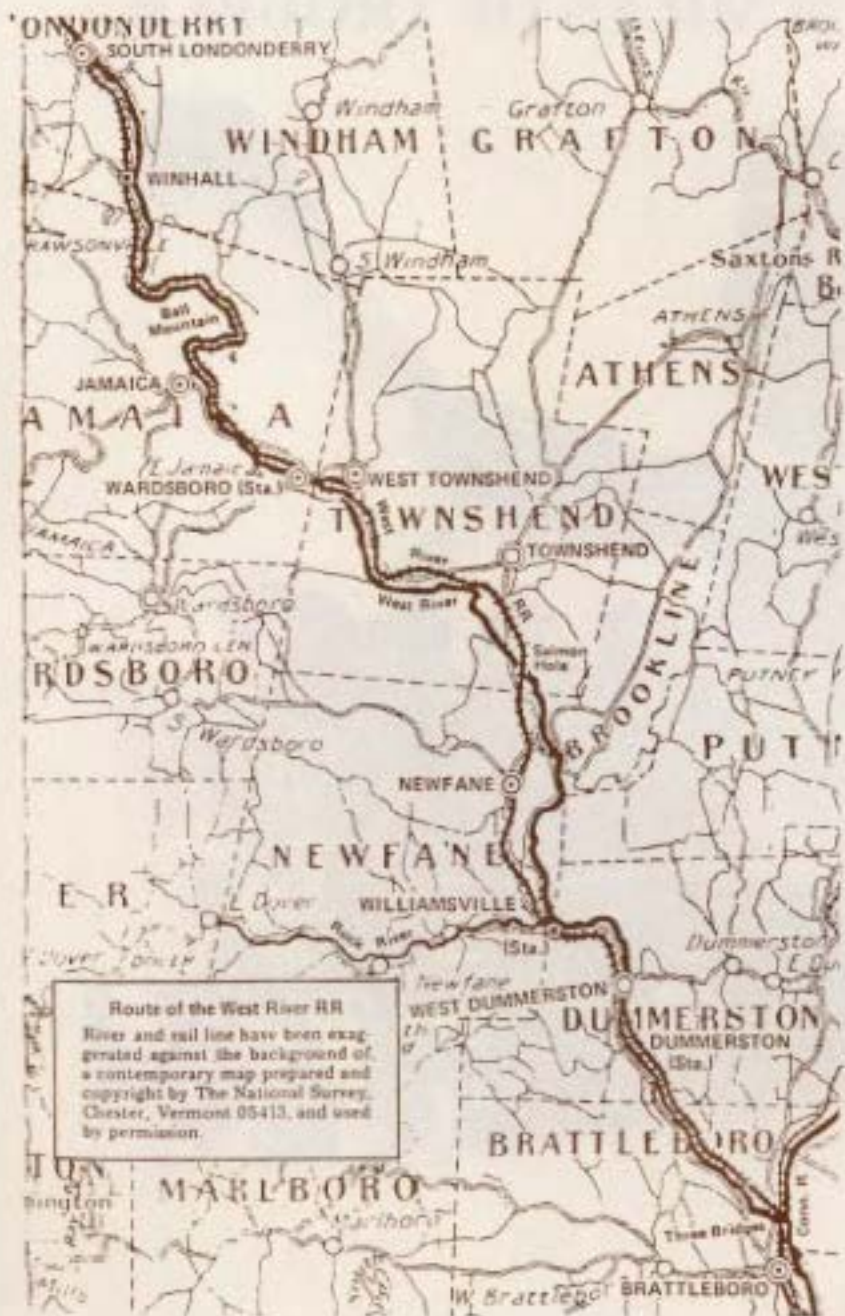
State of Vermont  
Agency of Natural Resources  
Department of Forests, Parks,  
and Recreation

## 36 MILES OF TROUBLE



The story of the West River Railroad  
through Jamaica State Park





## RAILROAD FEVER

In the mid 1800's, the whole nation was catching railroad fever. Towns suffering from post-Civil War depression expected the railroads to bring about economic miracles which would boost commerce and stimulate local trade.

Jamaica was no exception. The town was steadily losing its population to the lure of the western frontier. Mills which had once prospered were shutting their doors, and local farms were foreclosing.

The people of Jamaica dreamed of a golden future in which local farmers and millers could ship their products off to bigger and more profitable markets. They believed their dream would be fulfilled with the coming of the railroad.

## GOING UP THE GAUGE

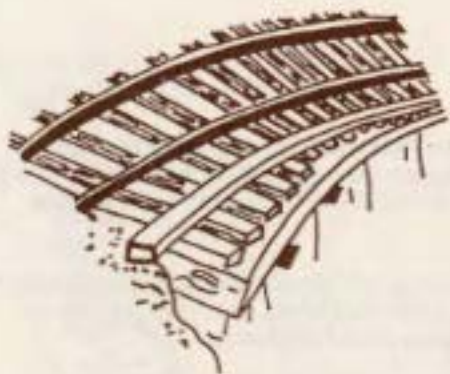
In 1867, the West River Railroad Company was granted a charter to build a line from Brattleboro to Jamaica and on to Londonderry. By 1877, each town on the route had bonded enough funds to get the railroad started.

Ground was broken in November 1878 and a year later the last rail was laid in place amidst a great fanfare. However, due to a shortage of funds a cheaper three foot or "narrow gauge" track was used. A trip on the railroad quickly became known as "going up the gauge."



THIS CERTIFICATE WAS NEVER WORTH MORE THAN IN 1879





## BIG EVENTS ON THE RAIL

Passengers flocked to the West River Railroad for two big annual events. The most popular was the Brattleboro Fair. On fair day, every possible piece of train equipment was converted for passenger use. Fairgoers might find themselves sitting on rough wooden planks, riding on the top of cars, or even worse, hanging out the sides.

The other big event was the railroad stockholders' meeting. Everyone who had a share in the railroad got a free ride to Brattleboro, dinner, and a room for the night.

Since the West River Railroad failed to ever show a profit, these events were probably the only returns reaped from the investment.



Jamaica Railroad Station 1911. T

## THE TRY-DAILY RUN

According to a South Londonderry newspaper, the West River Railroad trains ran "try-daily". That is, they went down in the morning and tried to get back at night. This was due to delays of all kinds, as well as construction and maintenance problems.

The locomotives were woodburning and had to be refueled or "wooded up" along the way. Men and boys often helped the crew refuel to shorten the stop, while women passed the time gathering flowers or berries along the track.



Construction Crew 1910. BP

In hunting season, many men shot deer from the train and stowed the venison for an unbilled ride home.

There is one story of a man who lost his false teeth out the train window while spitting his chewing tobacco. The train was stopped as passengers searched for the missing teeth.



Construction and maintenance problems which plagued the railroad earned it the nickname, "36 Miles of Trouble." An overeagerness to see the railroad completed, a shortage of funds, and frequent flooding were responsible for many of the problems.

The railroad bed was made as narrow as possible ... sometimes too narrow. Trains would sink down into the West River on one side of the track, or sway and bang against the ledges on the other side. This process of banging and swaying eventually widened the ledges enough for a clear passage.

As if this wasn't enough, all of the early wooden railroad bridges, tracks, and even the roadbed would wash away with Jamaica's regular flooding.



West River train wreck at Rands Crossing below Newfane. BP

## STRANDED IN SNOWDRIFTS

Vermont's stormy winters posed more problems for the West River Railroad.

During winter journeys, some riders found themselves shivering in unheated cars while others had to flee cars set ablaze by overstoked stoves.

Trains were sometimes stuck in huge snowdrifts for days. While stranded, passengers sought meals at local farms, or as a last resort took eggs from the freight car and fried them over the firebox using coal shovels.



## WAITING ... AND WAITING

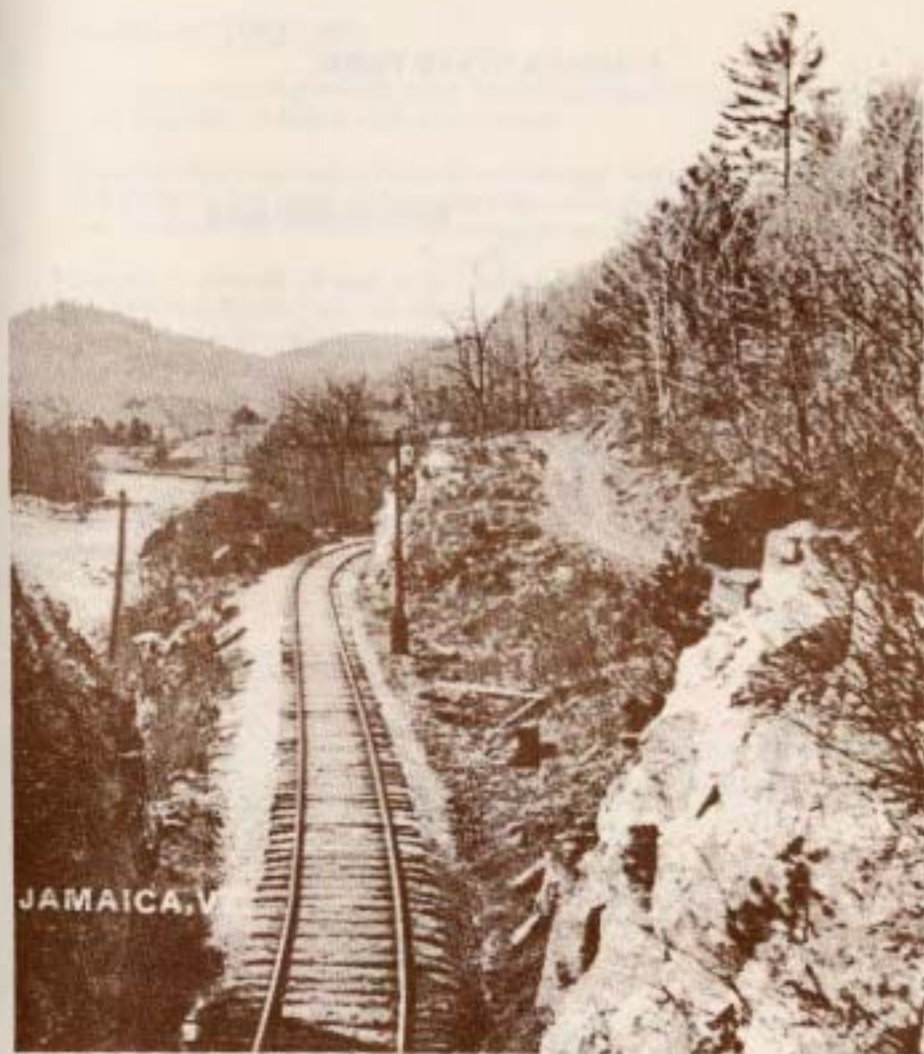
Waiting for the train became a popular summer activity in Jamaica. Townspeople would hear the distant whistle and run down to the station to greet passengers and receive mail.

Wits of the time claimed conductors would stay at the station until the farmer's hen laid just one more egg for an even dozen to sell at the market.

In Newfane, passengers were delayed because the train had to be pulled up a steep grade in two pieces. One trainman took advantage of this wait. He rode up on the first half and courted a local widow while waiting for the second half to arrive.



Folks waiting at the Brattleboro Station 1917. BP



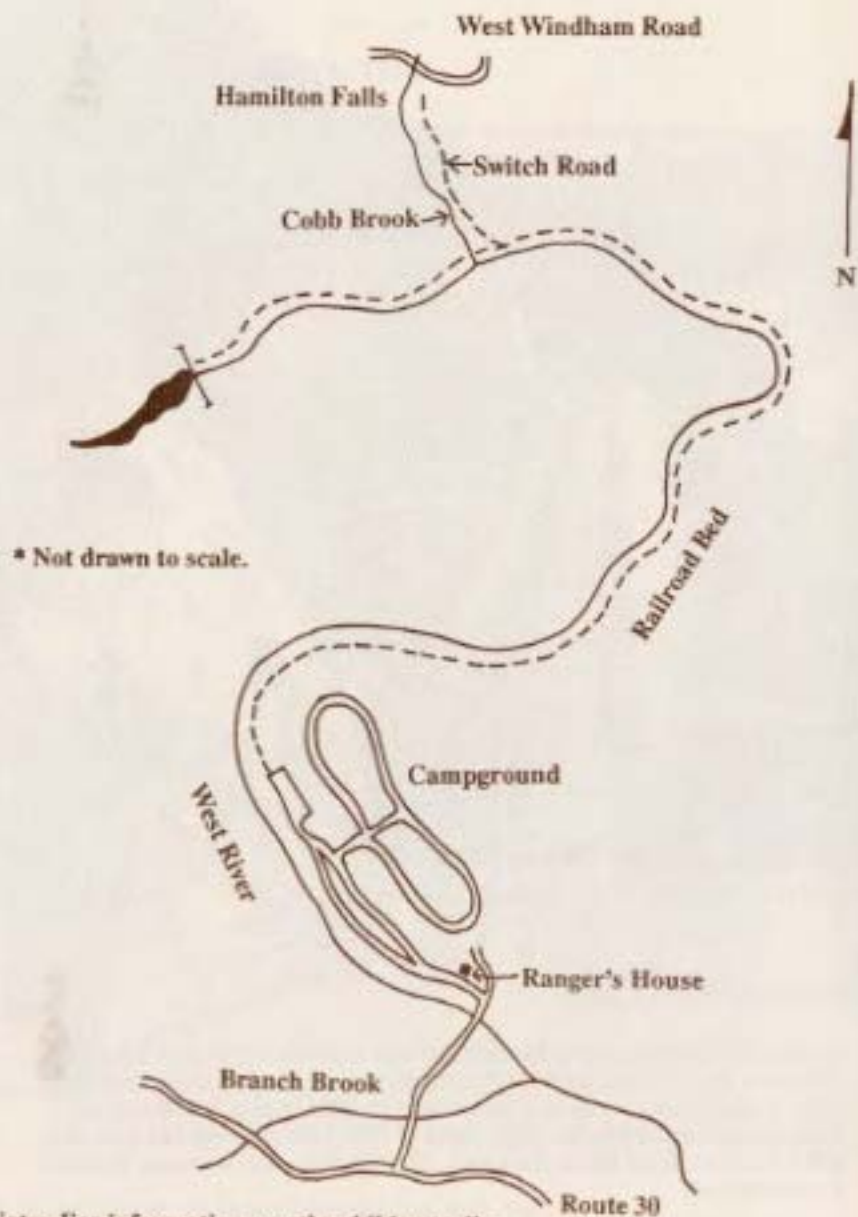
West River Valley Railroad through Jamaica 1911. T

## END OF THE LINE

By the turn of the century the railroad was showing signs of demise: Crossties were rotted, parts of the roadbed were washed away, and cars were in disrepair. There was an attempt in 1905 to upgrade the track, but it proved unsuccessful. The flood of 1927 carried away most of what was left of the West River Railroad. Shortly after, the company filed for abandonment.

In 1939, the rails were torn up for scrap and sold to salvage, ending 56 years of railroad service to the West River Valley.

## JAMAICA STATE PARK



Note: For information on other hiking trails see Jamaica Trail Guide Brochure.

## RAILROAD RELICS

The old Jamaica station still stands behind the ranger's quarters near the park entrance. It is now a private residence.

You can follow the route of the railroad through Jamaica State Park on the Railroad Bed Trail. Notice where the rock was blasted to widen the bed for the trains, and look for old cross-ties and discarded spikes.

About 1.5 miles up the trail, at the second creek that meets the path, the trail veers from the river. On the left are the remains of what might have been an old railroad maintenance shed.

Further up the trail is the Switch Road leading to Hamilton Falls. This trail was used to transport goods down to the track to be shipped off to market.

Near the base of the Switch Road are the remains of the Cobb Brook bridge.

Photographs courtesy of Brooks Memorial Library: Porter Thayer and Brattleboro Photos Collections.

## References

Booker, Warren. Historical Notes - Jamaica Vermont, Brattleboro: E.L. Hildeth & Co. Inc. 1940.

Morse, Victor. 36 Miles of Trouble - The Story of the West River Railroad, Brattleboro: The Stephen Greene Press. 1979.

Worthen, Mark. Hometown Jamaica - A Pictorial History of a Vermont Village, Brattleboro: Griswold Offset Printing Inc. 1976.

Produced by Conservation Education 12/88  
TLN/SAF/ILF

*printed on 100% recycled paper*