



HARLAN GRISWOLD AWARD

The Farmington Canal Heritage Trail is Connecticut's biggest historic site, stretching 54 miles from New Haven to the Massachusetts state line.

Beginning in 1825, New Haven investors constructed a canal—the most advanced transportation technology of the day—from that city to Northampton, Massachusetts. They wanted to provide easy access between inland areas and the port of New Haven—and to divert business away from New Haven's longtime rival, Hartford. The canal opened in 1828 but was never a commercial success. Undercapitalized and poorly constructed, it was constantly springing leaks that halted traffic. In the 1840s it was sold, and a railroad—a newer transportation technology—was built, mostly following the canal bed or towpath.

Two surviving locks, in Cheshire and Hamden, were listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973 and 1982 respectively, and twenty-five canal sections not altered by the railroad were added to the Register in 1985.

When the railroad in turn shut down, in the 1980s, developers were ready to swoop in. In 1987, the line attracted the attention of Hamden and North Haven citizens fighting a proposed regional mall in Hamden. While scouting the site for wetlands that might block the mall, they discovered instead the abandoned railroad tracks. With a bit of research, they found out about a new movement to convert abandoned rail lines to recreational trails.

What followed was a years-long struggle pitting the activists against developers, development-hungry municipal governments, and the Interstate Commerce Commission. The Farmington Canal Rail-to-Trail Association was formed and, with advice from the national Rails-to-Trails Conservancy plus conceptual designs funded by local grants, slowly persuaded the Towns of Hamden and Cheshire and the City of New Haven to dedicate their portions of the rail line to a trail. Easiest to convince was Cheshire, which had already restored Lock 12 as a town park, with a small museum, as well as blacksmith and carpenter shops, lockkeeper's house, and picnic area. Hamden and New Haven had development opportunities in mind and were more difficult, but in the end they came to see a trail as a community asset.

The last holdout was Yale University, which for years resisted committing the section of canal bed through its campus. Finally, under President Rick Levin, Yale joined the effort.

The first six miles of trail were opened in 1996. In a few areas, the imprint of the original canal can still be seen, along with retaining walls, canal locks, and other features. Currently, the remaining path from Yale to Long Wharf is under construction along roadways since the FBI office blocks the original canal/railroad bed.

“It’s amazing that it’s there at all,” says Nancy Alderman, a founder of the Farmington Canal Rail-to-Trail Association, of the struggle. But once those early efforts began to show success, the process developed its own momentum and became much easier.

North of Cheshire, development of the trail occurred independently. After Congress passed the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (called ISTEA), which provided funding for Transportation Enhancements, the Farmington Valley Trails Council was formed in 1992 by Preston Reed and other concerned citizens to promote and support the conversion.

Six town governments and staff cooperated in the creation of the trail development committee and in providing matching funds not supplied by ISTEA. The first sections of the “Farmington Valley Greenway” were paved in Simsbury and Farmington beginning in 1993 and ’94. Other sections followed, with construction on three final sections, through Southington and Plainville, scheduled for 2024 and 2025.

Today, the trail serves hikers, walkers, runners, cyclists, and commuters, continuing to play its historic role as a vital transportation corridor that ties Connecticut communities together.

This ongoing heritage has been a cooperative effort with many participants. Construction and maintenance are handled by the towns and cities through which it passes. Federal and state funding has made construction possible. Friends’ groups or local historical societies or conservation groups sponsor events and cleanup days. Together, the Farmington Canal Rail-to-Trail Association and the Farmington Valley Trails Council provide the glue that holds all the parts together, by serving as the primary advocates for the trail.

Presented jointly by Preservation Connecticut and the State Historic Preservation Office, the Harlan Griswold Award honors outstanding contributions to the preservation and revitalization of Connecticut’s historic places in memory of Harlan Griswold, the longtime chair of the Connecticut Historical Commission, forerunner to the present-day Historic Preservation Council, and a founder of the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation, now known as Preservation Connecticut.

Harlan Griswold once said, “To me, preservation is more about my grandchildren than about my grandparents.” The Farmington Canal Rail to Trail Association and the Farmington Valley Trails Council exemplify that attitude: In their work to create, maintain, and promote the Farmington Canal Heritage Trail, they are helping to build a better future for their children and grandchildren. We are honored to present the Harlan H. Griswold Award to these two organizations for their outstanding contributions to preservation in Connecticut.

Presented by the Connecticut State Historic Preservation Office and Preservation Connecticut, 9 May 2024