

Courtesy of the Bristol Historical Society

One of the crews that built the Bristol Railroad. What do you think of their tools and work clothes?

THE BRISTOL RAILROAD

By GREG PAHL

Before there were railroads it was hard to travel in Vermont. Roads were narrow, rough, steep, and often muddy. Most people walked or rode horses. If they had heavy loads to carry they used wagons or sleds pulled by teams of horses or oxen. It took a long time to get anywhere. Bad weather made travel even harder.

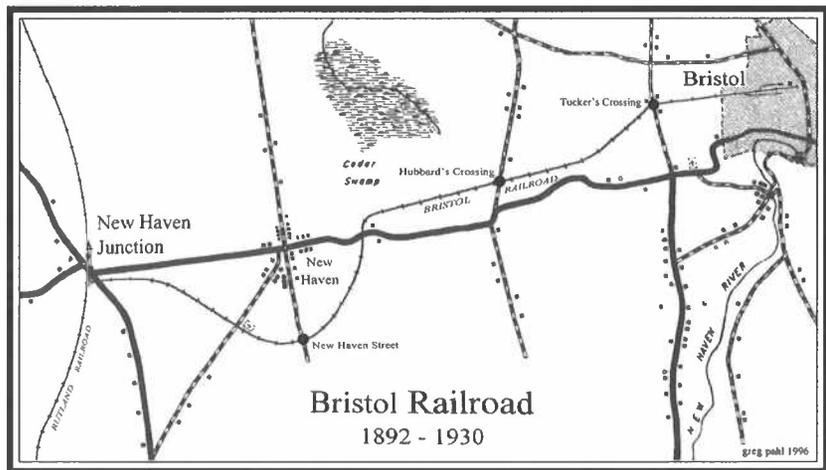
The railroad changed all that. It carried people and goods quickly, easily, and cheaply all year round, in all kinds of weather, even across the mountains. By 1890 there more than 950 miles of railroad tracks in Vermont. Trains stopped at more than 200 stations and connected Vermont to the rest of the world. But not everyone was close to a railroad. The nearest railroad to Bristol was the Rutland Railroad. Trains stopped six miles away at New Haven Depot. During mud season and when there were storms those six miles might as well have been sixty.

For years people who lived around Bristol tried to raise money to build a railroad to join the mainline at New Haven Depot. The railroad, they thought, would be a better way to ship their lumber and produce to markets. It

would make it easier for them to travel and to visit family and friends. It would bring in goods from far away. In 1890 a group of New York businessmen agreed to invest \$38,000 in building the railroad. The people who lived in the area agreed to raise another \$30,000.

Work started in July 1890 with about 150 men and 60 teams of horses. Early autumn rains slowed the work. When winter came no rails had yet been laid.

In the spring of 1891 the railroad ran out of money. In July Percival W. Clement, a banker who was one of the owners of the Rutland Railroad, took over the project. A few months later the line was finished. The first train pulled out of Bristol on November 25. It carried a



The Bristol Railroad's route. The large dots show the three stops between Bristol and New Haven Junction.

carload of potatoes for markets outside of the state. The name of the station at the other end of the line was soon changed to New Haven Junction.¹

On the afternoon of January 5, 1892 a big crowd gathered at the end of the track on North Street in Bristol for the official opening of the railroad. At 3:05 pm the first passenger train, with about 60 people on board, chugged slowly out of Bristol. The crowd cheered.

The first run was supposed to take 25 minutes to reach the Junction. It got there in 18. Three loaded freight cars were added to the train for the trip back to Bristol. The steep uphill grades going back and the extra weight of the freight cars were almost too much for the old rented engine to handle. The return trip took almost twice as long.

In February a shiny new coal-fired locomotive arrived. It had a cowcatcher and coupler on each end. This meant the engine could either push or pull the train and didn't need to be turned around. Everyone called it "Number One" because of the large "1" painted on the smokebox and steam dome.

At first the train made two round-trips a day. Soon there were three. A round-trip to New Haven Junction cost 60 cents. There were three stops in between.

¹ A junction is a place where two things come together. A railroad junction is a place where two railroads meet.



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Number One at the Bristol station. That is probably Fred LaParle standing in the engine doorway.

One day in 1892 the train left Bristol with several freight cars ahead of the passenger car. A few minutes later, on a long downhill grade, the passenger car came unhooked from the rest of the train. The engine crew didn't notice. They continued on their way with the freight cars.

The passengers were never in any danger. The train's conductor was riding in the coach with them and there was an emergency brake. Using the brake, the conductor let the car roll slowly down the grade. He stopped it once to chase a calf off the track. Then the car rolled to the bottom of the hill, where it came to a stop.

Up ahead the engineer finally noticed that

the passenger car was missing. He stopped the train. Then he backed up the line, reattached the coach, and made it to the Junction in time to meet the mail train from Rutland.

In the early years the railroad carried a lot of passengers. There were special runs for church and club groups and trips to circuses and other events. The railroad also hauled out lumber and farm products. Freight came into Bristol too. A lot of that incoming freight was coal to heat homes and businesses in the area.

Percival Clement, the railroad's president, also owned the coal yard in Bristol. A railroad siding ran up a steep trestle² that led to a shed where the coal was unloaded and stored. It was hard to get a loaded coal car up the trestle. If Fred LaParle, the engineer, drove the train too slowly it would stop before it reached the shed. If he went too fast the train might crash into the shed. Wet leaves or ice on the rails made the trip even harder. The local boys didn't help much, either. Sometimes they would rub the tracks with cow manure. The locomotive's wheels would spin on the slippery tracks, and Fred LaParle would have to back the train up and try again.

In winter the passenger car was heated by a stove. Number One usually just pushed the snow aside. But from time to time the train got

² A trestle is a framework that supports a road going up a steep hill or over a gorge.

stuck in deep drifts. Then the railroad had to hire men to shovel it out. Sometimes, when the snow was too deep, passengers had to leave the warm train and finish their trip in an open sleigh or wagon.

In the early 1900s more and more people bought cars. More and more roads were paved. It was easier to get around. People could choose their own time to travel. The railroad wasn't as important as it had been to the people of Bristol. Traffic on the railroad declined. So did its income. In 1927 the great flood that damaged most of the mills along the New Haven River washed away most of the railroad's freight traffic too. Later that year the railroad went bankrupt. On April 12, 1930 the train made its last run, pulled by old Number One.

Today cars and trucks take less than ten minutes to drive the six miles from

Bristol to New Haven Junction. But traces of the railroad still exist if you know where to look. The brick station on Route 7 at New Haven Junction is now the office of a construction company. The Bristol depot, just off North Street, is a private home. The railroad's engine house was moved to Pine Street and is a storage building. The coal shed and trestle, however, are gone. Trees and brush have overgrown the grade Number One used to chug along.

Few people remember the old Bristol Railroad. But early in this century it changed the way people and goods traveled and connected some small Vermont towns to the world outside the Champlain Valley.

Rooting Around

Trains carried marble, crops, food, fuel, lumber all over Vermont. Trains still run along the mainline routes. Most of the branch lines like the Bristol Railroad no longer exist. Your local historical society may have pictures and maps of local branch railroads and hints on where you can find traces of this important part of our past.

A 1924 timetable for the Bristol Railroad.

BRISTOL RAILROAD											
TIME TABLE No. 86											
Taking Effect September 29, 1924.											
Trains going west.				On Week Days only.				Trains going east.			
5	3	1	Miles	STATIONS				Miles	2	4	6
P. M.	P. M.	A. M.							A. M.	P. M.	P. M.
4.00	12.05	7.45	0	Lv.	Bristol	Ar.		6	9.15	1.10	5.15
4.17	12.22	8.02	4		New Haven			2	8.58	12.53	4.58
4.25	12.30	8.10	6	Ar.	New Haven Junc'n		Lv	0	8.50	12.45	4.50
PERCIVAL W. CLEMENT, President						H. R. BARNEY, Superintendent					

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