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Learn More About Fairfield County History

Transportation: The Arrival of the Railroad and Modern Highways

In 1844, the Connecticut General Assembly approved the charter for the New York and New Haven Railroad Company to begin construction of a rail line. Four years later, in December of 1848, the first train came through Fairfield. Many of the town's residents did not greet this event with enthusiasm since it threatened to change their quiet way of life.

In fact, the railroad's impact was profound. Suddenly New York City was only a two hour and ten minute ride away. Fairfield men could work in New York City and return the same day if they chose. The new mobility also affected women, who gained the freedom to visit friends and family in the city much more frequently. People who had previously grumbled about the construction of a railroad soon saw its advantages, including the economic benefits to the town.

The arrival of the railroad also initiated a change in Fairfield's identity, transforming its town center to a resort destination. Well-to-do city dwellers found respite in the peaceful setting with its ocean breezes, and some built lavish summer homes in the town. Others stayed at the fashionable and imposing new hotel, Fairfield House, situated near the town green. Construction of the hotel in 1848, the town's first, coincided with the new railroad. The hotel stood on the northeast corner of Main Street (Old Post Road) and Center Street (Beach Road), and was said to be the largest of its kind in the state, boasting more than one hundred rooms. It also featured a ballroom, dining room, and spacious verandas where summer visitors could enjoy the setting and fresh air. In 1889 the name was changed to Hotel St. Marc's, and a large annex was constructed, the only portion that remains today on the property.

Steamboat service from Bridgeport and Norwalk to New York also brought many visitors but was gradually reduced, as train travel, with its convenient local stops, became the norm.



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Modern Highways

Intolerable traffic congestion on Connecticut's roadways is not a recent phenomenon. In the 1920s, as the popularity of automobiles increased, existing roads proved inadequate and frustrating to drivers. Connecticut resisted the idea of multiple-lane highways, even as neighboring Westchester County in New York State began building a modern parkway system in the 1920s. The potential for new highways to attract out-of-state sightseers was viewed as an intrusion on quiet New England.

As traffic problems worsened, a controlled-access highway seemed to be the only solution. In the early 1930s, plans for a parkway, designed with distinctive bridges and landscaping, was approved. In 1934, construction began on the Merritt Parkway as a federal Works Project Administration (W.P.A.) project. The first section of the "Queen of Parkways," between Greenwich and Norwalk, opened in July of 1938. The remaining stretch of the thirty-seven-mile route, including Fairfield's hard-won "no exit zone" through Greenfield Hill, opened on September 2, 1940. Each of the original thirty-four bridges spanning the parkway was individually designed, contributing to its unique character, and making it an appealing route for travelers.

Commercial traffic was prohibited from the parkway, however, and truck accidents on Route 1 remained a serious problem. In the early 1950s, a Shore Line Thruway was proposed by the Connecticut Highway Department, but was opposed by advocates of an inland route less vulnerable to foreign attack. During the Cold War years, the threat of attack to Connecticut's shoreline infrastructure and towns was perceived to be real. Despite the fears, the Shore Line route won, and construction of the Connecticut Turnpike was underway in 1956.

Construction of the Connecticut Turnpike formed a major link in the country's East Coast artery, Interstate 95. Fairfielders reported immediate improvements on the Post Road as trucks began using the Connecticut Turnpike. But the convenience of the nation's new highway system came with a high price tag. In many urban areas and towns, older neighborhoods were bisected or completely razed in the name of "progress." Some homes in the Mill Plain area were moved to new sites but others fell victim to the wrecking ball. The greatest losses occurred on the eastern side of Fairfield in the Holland Hill and lower Tunxis Hill neighborhoods settled by Hungarians, Poles, and Swedes. These neighborhoods were fractured by the expressway route, which drastically altered residents' daily routines and, ultimately, the cultural cohesiveness.