

Rail Trails

Once the routes of locomotives, disused railroad beds are getting a second lease on life as pathways for folks on foot, on bicycles, and on horseback.

by Bryan A. Oesterreich

It's a steamy Saturday afternoon in July. Two young boys walk along train tracks just outside of town. One carries a stick; the other scans the track bed for possible treasure. Their thoughts are of adventure and far-away places. Up ahead, the rails bend gently to the left. What places do the trains visit? How far do they reach? The boys wonder if they'll ever follow the rails beyond their line of sight. If they didn't then, they can now.

North Carolina's rail system took more than 100 years to build. At its peak, it included more than 5,200 miles of track. The system was designed for transporting goods and citizens economically and quickly.

Then along came the interstate highway system and large-capacity tractor-trailers. People began driving, and trucks began hauling much of the freight previously shipped by train. Little by little, the rail system declined in popularity, and the miles of track used lessened. Weeds, bushes, and trees sprouted along abandoned rail lines. Once shiny rails turned brown with rust. People whose property bordered existing lines heard fewer and fewer whistles. And no one thought too much about it — until the mid-1970s.

The idea of using abandoned rail lines for walking, jogging, cycling, or horseback riding came out of the Midwest and quickly spread across the nation. The popularity of converting rails to trails resulted in the formation, in 1985, of the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, a national organization based in Washington, D.C. Barely three years later, a group of Tar Heel citizens formed North Carolina Rail-Trails (NCRT). The organization has been rolling along ever since — adding miles of new trails every year. Today, there are 28 rail-trail locations across the state either in operation, development, or in the planning stages. Trails vary in length from the 1/2-mile trail in Nantahala Gorge to two 30-mile projects — Coastal Carolina Trail, planned for Beaufort, Martin, and Pitt counties, and the American Tobacco Trail that will weave through Wake, Chatham, and Durham counties.

All aboard

Carolyn Townsend, chairman of NCRT, has been on board since its founding. She says the trails provide a wide variety of benefits for Tar Heel residents. "Rail trails provide opportunities for families to enjoy their community and become more physically active," she says. "People can enjoy rail trails simply by walking, bicycling, using roller-blades, walking their dog, or enjoying time with family or friends."

Townsend, like everyone who works for NCRT, volunteers her time. She's a full-time nurse and very aware of how people can improve their health by using the trails. "Increasing physical activity is an important objective to reducing risk of obesity, diabetes, hypertension, among other health problems," she says. She notes that rail trails offer not only a safe venue for exercise but also a visually pleasing experience as many of them stretch through beautiful natural landscapes.

While rail trails bestow benefits upon those who use them, communities also stand to gain. Trails, in some contexts, can provide corridors for public utilities — gas, electric, water, and communications. Utility leases can generate income to help offset the costs of developing and maintaining a trail.

Although trails are developed along abandoned rail lines, sometime in the future a community may find itself in need of a rail corridor to attract new business. For abandoned tracks left undeveloped, the property may revert back to the adjoining property owners. Developing a rail trail protects the corridor for future use, if needed. Most Tar Heel communities are engaged in historic preservation, and in many cities and towns, tracks run through or alongside areas being restored. Rail trails provide a rich window of observation, just as they did when trains pulled slowly through town. Communities have found that people are willing to travel to bike or hike a safe, scenic trail, generating additional revenue from things like food service, lodging, bicycle repairs/sales, and, of course, proper walking attire.

Rail trails that slice through rural natural settings are popular, but trails can also be a favorite venue for those in urban areas as well. The American Tobacco Trail is one such case. The ATT, when completed, will traverse more than 30 miles through Wake, Chatham, and Durham counties. In Wake and Chatham, the trail will provide a rural landscape and will have a natural surface. But in southern Durham County, the trail will occupy an urban setting and will be paved, and a pedestrian/bicycle bridge across I-40 is planned for the Durham segment.

The trail will follow the route of the Durham & South Carolina Railroad that was constructed in the early 1900s, beginning downtown at the Durham Bulls Athletic Park. In downtown Durham, the ATT will connect with more than 113 miles of greenway trails in and around the city.

Considerable support

If all this sounds delightful, it is. Just ask someone walking a rail trail. What most trekkers probably don't realize, however, is how much time, effort, and money went into the project. On all three counts, it's considerable.

At a recent NCRT board meeting in Williamston, board members met with local rail-trail organizers to plan the Coastal Carolina Trail, tentatively scheduled to extend some 30 miles from Washington, Beaufort County, up through Pitt County, to its terminus in Oak City, Martin County.

During the meeting, board members discussed funding (grants and private/corporate donations), landscaping (removing old ties and tracks), manpower (local support), and how NCRT can provide support for the local project.

After the meeting, Crystal Baity, executive director of travel and tourism for Martin County, was excited about the upcoming project. “The Coastal Carolina Trail will give residents and visitors the opportunity to use a unique linear park for horseback riding (nearby Martin Community College’s equine program hosts frequent horse shows), fat-wheel biking, or hiking,” she says. “It’s also a low-impact use on the natural environment and has the potential for a positive economic impact in the community because users need goods and services.”

Part of her excitement probably stems from how well the Skewarkee Trail in Williamston has been received. The 0.9-mile trail begins downtown and reaches the banks of the Roanoke River, and officials are considering a bike rental facility to allow boaters access to the downtown area. “People think it’s a great addition to the town, especially for a small town our size,” Baity says. “Visitors have been very impressed with the trail. It gives folks an alternative, safe place to exercise. And it provides a linear historical connection between downtown and the river — and port trade is why Williamston came to be.”

Tar Heel youths of today and tomorrow may not be as able to find the parallel rails that conjured up dreams of adventure for their parents and grandparents, but thanks to our new system of rail trails, they will be able to follow the same paths.

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