

MANSFIELD MEMORIES: Mansfield's 'Big Dig'- The Underpass Project

MANSFIELD - This is the first of a four-part series on the Underpass Project of the 1950s, which eliminated grade-level train crossings.

Today's residents might find it difficult to visualize Mansfield without its underpasses. We can't imagine waiting at a grade crossing for a train to pass by. And we shudder to think how dangerous grade crossings would be today. But until the 1950s such was reality for the people of Mansfield.

When the main railroad line first cut through Mansfield in 1835, grade crossings were not so troublesome. The town had a population of about 1,500. The villages of East and West Mansfield were as populated as the center of town. The main line only crossed a roadway at Central and West streets, and Elm and Gilbert streets in West Mansfield. When the Taunton (Old Colony) branch was added in 1836, it intersected with North Main, East and Fruit streets.



Above, the Chauncy Street grade crossing as it looked in 1950.

But with the arrival of industrialization, factories were built in downtown Mansfield. Workers soon followed, causing a population boom. By 1900, there were about 4,000 citizens in town. Twenty years later, there were 6,200. And by 1950 the number stood at nearly 7,200. Railroad accidents had long been a fact of life in Mansfield, and the danger only increased with the invention of the automobile.

To understand the magnitude of the problem, one must picture Mansfield in the 1950s. Heading east on Chauncy Street (Route 106), travelers passed over the tracks of both the main and Old Colony lines in a busy area then known as "Depot

Square.” A gate tender manually cranked a gate to control street traffic. The same was true at North Main Street for both rail lines.

Central Street, then part of Route 140 and the main roadway to Foxborough, also had a gate tender. In total, there were four grade crossings along the main line, at North Main, Chauncy, Central, and West streets. There were eight more along the Old Colony line, at Chauncy, West Cottage, West Church, North Main, Court, Park, East, and Fruit streets. The busier intersections had gate tenders. Others did not.



Above a 1953 map of Mansfield shows where train tracks crossed roadways. In total, there were four grade crossings along the main line, at North Main, Chauncy, Central, and West streets. There were eight more along the Old Colony line, at Chauncy, West Cottage, West Church, North Main, Court, Park, East, and Fruit streets.

Plans to eliminate grade crossings were given serious consideration by the early 20th century. Chocolate factory owner Walter Lowney personally paid for a study that would have re-routed the Taunton branch around the center of town. In 1912 State Rep. Clarence Barnes proposed a bill to eliminate grade crossings throughout town but was unable to garner support for his cause.

Over the next several decades, additional proposals were discussed among state and local leaders. In 1938, federal funds were available for a series of “hideous overpasses.” Nearly all residents agreed downtown overpasses would be an eyesore. Longtime selectman William P. McDermott reflected the majority opinion when he vowed, “the board and the citizens would fight to the last ditch.” The proposal was abandoned. In 1946, Town Meeting appropriated \$10,000 to again study the problem, but nothing was resolved.

Between the years of 1938 and 1950, nine lives were lost to accidents at grade crossings in Mansfield. The final death, that of 80-year-old veteran George N. Davies at the Chauncy Street grade crossing in October 1950, galvanized public opinion: something had to be done. But what?