



Rhode Island Division

About Rail Explorers

Rail Explorers first opened in the summer of 2015 in New York's Adirondacks. The Rail Explorers: Rhode Island Division opened on April 08, 2018 as a division of the Newport and Narragansett Bay Railroad.

Pedal powered rail vehicles date back to at least the 1850's, when maintenance workers used hand-cars and 'rail bikes' to travel along the tracks. They were used to transport crew and materials for track inspection and repairs. Today, there are a variety of designs in use around the world: the 'Draisine' of Europe 'rail bikes' with aluminum frames and rubber wheels; and modified road bikes with an outrigger wheel.

Our custom built explorers are the latest development of this technology, and are the global leader in safety, design, and ease of operation.

Old Colony Railroad

Rail Explorers follows the route that was once part of the Old Colony Railroad. The Old Colony Railroad was a major railroad system, mainly covering southeastern Massachusetts and parts of Rhode Island. It operated from 1845 to 1893. Old Colony trains ran from Boston to points such as Plymouth, Fall River, New Bedford, Newport, Providence, and Cape Cod.

The Newport line opened on February 1, 1864 and the railroad (no doubt with the encouragement of local business owners) sponsored the excursion packages to attract tourists to Newport. The one dollar round-trip Sunday ride from Boston to Newport was hugely popular.

In 1893 the Old Colony was merged with the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad Passenger service reached an all-time high during the summers of 1912 and 1913, when twenty-four trains per day ran along these rails. The rails were also used for freight, excursion specials and were frequently used for private charters bringing wealthy out-of-towners to their 'cottages' on Bellevue Avenue.

Passenger service ended in 1938, but freight trains continued to run on these rails until the Sakonnet River Bridge was damaged in 1980. The rails are now owned by the Rhode Island Department of Transportation.

Today Rail Explorers is proud to join the Newport & Narragansett Bay Railroad to bring locals and visitors along these scenic historic rails.

Portsmouth Grove Station: History

The area currently occupied by Rail Explorers & the Newport and Narragansett Bay Railroad has seen many uses over the past centuries.

Native Americans of Rhode Island

For more than 30,000 years this part of Rhode Island was home to the Narragansett tribe. In 1524 Italian explorer Giovanni da Verrazzano encountered a large Native American population living alongside Narragansett Bay, hunting, fishing, and practicing agriculture. The Narragansett welcomed the early Europeans, but by 1676 they had been forced out by colonial expansion.

1855-1862: Hotel and Pleasure Grounds

In 1855 developers converted Portsmouth Grove from forest and farmland into pleasure grounds. The Portsmouth Grove House, a spacious and luxurious hotel, a wharf, and docking space for visiting yachts. Portsmouth Grove welcomed thousands of guests who would arrive off steam ships from Jamestown, Boston, and New York. The grounds offered dancing, bathing facilities, bowling, fishing, 'shore dining' & clam bakes. Moonlight excursions between Newport and Portsmouth Grove were a popular attraction.

1862-1865: Civil War Hospital

On July 4, 1862, the government announced that Portsmouth Grove House and grounds were being turned over for use as a hospital. On July 6, only 48 hours later, two steamers arrived from Yorktown, Virginia and discharged 1,700 sick and wounded soldiers.

Though far from the front lines, Portsmouth Grove became the Lovell General Hospital. Thirty buildings were constructed and between 1862 and 1865 over 10,000 soldiers were treated here. At least 308 soldiers died on the grounds.

1900-1920 Coal Mines

Portsmouth Grove was at the southern end of an extensive network of coal mines which covered the northwest of Aquidneck Island. In the early 1900's this area was teeming with coal miners and mules hauling coal bins in and out of the mines. Local legend has it that some of the mules lived their entire lives underground. In 1901 Portsmouth Grove Station was built. The railroad helped to bring coal to steam ships on Narragansett Bay. The station was later named "Bradford Station."

WWII PT Boat (Patrol Torpedo Boat) Training Base

In 1942 the site became the Motor Torpedo Boat Squadrons Training Center. The Center grew to a sprawling facility with 13 buildings devoted to office space, 34 classrooms, 42 maintenance buildings, and 197 huts for living quarters. By March 1945 the Center had trained 1,797 officers and 11,668 bluejackets (enlisted sailors).

John F. Kennedy was one of the Navy officers to receive training here. Kennedy's actions to save his surviving crew after the sinking of PT-109 in the Pacific made him a war hero.

Northern Ramble

1. Melville Ponds Recreation Area

Melville Ponds is 150 acres of coastal woodland dotted by wetlands, ponds, and brooks. The nature preserve within the recreation area contains over four miles of hiking trails, which offer a variety of opportunities for bird watching and other forms of nature appreciation. Freshwater fishing is available at the upper and lower ponds. The ponds are stocked with trout.

2. Green Animals Topiary Garden

Green Animals is the oldest and most northern topiary garden in the United States. Established in 1872, there are now more than 80 pieces of topiary throughout the gardens, including animals and birds, geometric figures and ornamental designs, sculpted from California privet, yew, and English boxwood. The Garden is owned and maintained by the Preservation Society of Newport County. Green Animals is open to the public daily from May through October.

3. Cory's Lane

Now a popular clamming, fishing, and photography spot. Cory's Lane once housed a small flag stop station building.

4. Portsmouth Abbey School

This 525 acre estate was settled by the Freeborn family in the 1660's. A group of Benedictine Monks founded the Portsmouth Priory in 1918. In 1926 a private boy's school was opened with just 8 students. Today 350 students from over 26 countries attend the school. The waterfront stone building next to the railroad is the school's boathouse.

Both Senator Robert Kennedy and Senator Ted Kennedy attended Portsmouth Abbey School.

5. Bloody Brook and the Battle of Rhode Island

On August 29, 1778, British troops, supported by three regiments of Hessian mercenaries, marched from Newport along East and West Main Roads towards the American troops, camped at the north end of Aquidneck

Island. The Battle of Rhode Island took place in a broad variety to the east of where the railroad now runs.

By mid-afternoon when the battle ended more than four hundred men lay dead. The British has lost many men and the American forces, under the command of Colonel Christopher Greene and General John Sullivan, suffered fewer casualties.

So much blood was spilled that day that Barker Brook ran red, and became known as 'Bloody Brook.' Further upstream is 'Hessian Hole,' the burial place of at least 60 Hessian soldiers killed in the battle.

The Battle of Rhode Island is significant as the largest battle of the American Revolution in New England, and represents an important part of our African American heritage. Rhode Island was the first to accept the enlistment of non-whites, and this led to the creation of "the Black Regiment,' made up of Native Americans and former slaves who gained their freedom by choosing to join the fight against the British. During the Battle of Rhode Island the Black Regiment successfully repulsed several furious Hessian charges and gained much praise for their bravery.

The Battle of Rhode Island is remembered today with a monument at Patriots Park erected in honor of The Black Regiment.

6. Carnegie Abbey Club

The private Carnegie Abbey Club features residences and a waterfront link-style golf course designed by Donald Steel.

Most golfers at Carnegie Abbey Club are unaware that the water used to irrigate the golf course comes from miles and miles of abandoned coal mines beneath the grass. In the early 19th century this area was the center of a vast network of mines crisscrossing the northeast of Aquidneck Island.

Today, the mines contain an estimated 400 million gallons of fresh water. Carnegie Abbey's original developer briefly considered bottling this fresh water under a private Carnegie Abbey label.

The Carnegie Abbey Tower offering luxury apartments was erected on the site of the Kaiser Aluminum plant that fabricated aluminum and copper wire in the 1960's and 1970's. The transformation from heavy industry to luxury estates began in the 1990's. When the industrial tower was demolished, the new development was permitted to rebuild matching the size and height of the original building.

7. Portsmouth Station (Coal Mine Station)

This was the site of the original Portsmouth Station built in 1855. Portsmouth Station was a critical piece of Rhode Island's coal mining industry with connections to the wharves at the end of Willow Lane. The original station was destroyed in 1915, but was rebuilt and continued to serve passengers and freight until the closure of the line in 1968.

8. Hog Island and Hog Island Shoals Lighthouse

Hog Island is about 200 acres in size with a length of one-and-a-half miles and a width of three-quarters of a mile. The early settlers of Newport found the island and others nearby convenient for livestock because the animals could not wander far, and natural predators like wolves and foxes could not reach the island. Hogs were regularly kept there, giving rise to the island's name.

Hog Island Shoals Lighthouse was built in 1901 to protect ships from the treacherous rocky shoals around the island. The lighthouse is now privately owned and the property is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

9. Mount Hope Bridge

First opened on October 24, 1929, the Mount Hope Bridge connects Portsmouth and Bristol. The suspension bridge is 6,130 feet long with a main span of 1,200 feet between piers. The deck is supported by two massive cables, each eleven inches in diameter, and 2,020 miles of wire. The Mount Hope Bridge was the first bridge not to be painted black. It was painted green to better fit into the surrounding scenery.

10. Bristol Ferry Landing

This area was a transportation hub even in colonial times. Ferries ran to and from Bristol Ferry as early as 1640. George Washington used a ferry from here on March 13, 1781 traveling from Newport to Providence. In 1850 a hotel with accommodations for fifty people was built and for the next seventy-five years Bristol Ferry was a thriving place, with the hotel, a wharf, a store, summer cottages, a railroad station, a telegraph office and a post office. The Ferry was discontinued in 1929 with completion of the Mount Hope Bridge.

11. Bertha K. Russell Preserve

Bertha K. Russell is managed by the Aquidneck Land Trust. The railroad trestle passes over Founders Brook, where Anne Hutchinson and the founders of Rhode Island came ashore and signed the Portsmouth Compact of 1638. This was the first document in American history that severed both political and religious ties with England. The original Portsmouth Compact, a priceless frayed and torn piece of paper, is held in the Rhode Island state archive. Founder's Brook Park is located off Boyd's Lane, and has a memorial to Anne Hutchinson and a copy of the Portsmouth Compact of 1638.

The Bertha K. Russell Preserve is now a popular spot for hiking and birdwatching, with many varieties of birds frequenting the marshes and waterways. There is an Osprey nesting pole at the trestle bridge.

12. Brayton Point Power Station

The two massive cooling towers visible in the distance are part of the Brayton Point Power Station in Somerset, Massachusetts. The coal fired power plant, which began operations in the 1960's was shut down permanently on June 1, 2017.

13. Mount Hope – Montaup

Looking across the bay to Bristol's Mount Hope, one can see 'Montaup,' the home of Chief Ousamequin (1581-1661), the leader of the Wampanoag people. By showing the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock how to plant crops and survive in the New World, Ousamequin is believed to have saved the colony from starvation during its earliest years.

14. Montaup Country Club

Laid out on what was once the Chase Peach Orchard, Montaup Country Club opened as a three hole golf course in 1923. Without a formal architect the layout went through some changes over the years as it expanded to 18 holes. Today the semi-private club has 600 members and remains a favorite in Rhode Island. The restaurant and bar at the club are open to the public.

15. Sakonnet River Bridge

The rails continue to the end of Aquidneck Island, where a bridge once connected the rails to Tiverton, Fall River, and the rest of the national rail network. The original bridge was completed in 1863, but this was replaced by a swing bridge in 1900.

The bridge was closed in 1980 after it was damaged by an overweight train carrying military equipment. During a storm in 1988 a barge collided with one of the supports. The bridge was removed, and the Aquidneck Island's rail connection to the rest of the USA was severed.