

Back To The Future, Episode Four: Getting Around On Rails and Trails
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A Series from Sea Change Radio

In this edition of the Sea Change Radio series *Back To The Future*, Francesca Rheannon talks with historian Kerry Buckley about the heyday of the trolley system in Massachusetts; rail trail promoter Craig Della Penna talks about how rail trails came about and where they are going; and anthropologist Cathy Stanton talks about how we could reinvent the relationship between cars and other lower carbon means of transportation, like bikes and light rail.

Once upon a time, trains were the main way freight and people got around New England. With peak oil and climate change forcing us to consider alternatives to trucks and cars, rail may be coming into its own again. President Obama [is planning to give](#) \$8 billion in federal grants to states for high-speed rail infrastructure. But what about low speed, or light rail, like the network that used to criss-cross Massachusetts and other states until it went down under the twin assaults of the last Great Depression and the advent of the automobile?

[Plans are in the works](#) in eastern Massachusetts to develop new commuter rail lines connecting Fall River and New Bedford to Boston and linking Boston to towns in Rhode Island and New Hampshire. But western Massachusetts used to have a vibrant network of its own, as historian Kerry Buckley tells us. He's director of [Historic Northampton Museum and Education Center](#) and a Research Associate in American Studies at Smith College. He says, "legend has it you could get on the trolley in New York for a nickel and go to Boston, just by transferring from one line to the other."

Around the turn of the nineteenth century and into the early years of the twentieth, the bicycle became an important means of individual transportation. In so doing, it had no small part to play in the development of the automobile. For one thing, it required better roads than the dirt ones horse drawn carriages drove over. And the invention of the pneumatic tire also helped, first being put on bicycles, then on the new invention, the car. The bicycle in America, unlike in other countries, became more of a recreational vehicle than a primary means of transportation. But [Craig Della Penna](#) thinks that is beginning to change.

He is a prime mover behind the rail to trails movement in New England. As the region's field representative for [Rails-to-Trails Conservancy](#), a post he held for eight years, he helped create well over a 1000 miles of rail trails in almost 80 projects around New England.

Della Penna's own life embodies the transition from rails to trails. He used to work for the railroad, marketing the moving of freight. But as de-industrialization hit the region, rail began to fall on hard times. Della Penna says the rail lines died and had to be reborn as something else: bicycle trails that could revive neighborhoods and provide a healthy, sustainable means of getting around.

Craig della Penna is the author of four books on rail trails, including GREAT RAIL TRAILS OF THE NORTHEAST and a book about his hometown, Holyoke, MA. He lives right next to the [Norwottuck Rail Trail](#), which links Florence, Massachusetts with Belchertown.

[Cathy Stanton](#) is interested in how Americans can move away from a car-dependent culture. An anthropologist among historians, she studies tourism to historical sites; she thinks such sites can give their visitors an idea of a greener way to live. She says train travel as recreation is beginning to come back and that it is opening a way to more interurban light transit for utilitarian purposes.

Stanton teaches at Tufts University. She's the author of *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City*, among other works.

Back to the Future is a Sea Change Radio series looking at what the past can teach us as we transition to a more sustainable, lower carbon future. The series is funded in part by [Mass Humanities](#), which receives support from the Massachusetts Cultural Council and is an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.