

## Railroad Depots of New Bedford's Past

With all the speculation that the MBTA will extend the commuter rail line to New Bedford (and Fall River), it seems appropriate to survey New Bedford's rail history as well as the buildings that once served as its terminal. The city has a distinguished past regarding this indispensable metropolitan service. Two depots were constructed in adjacent locations, near the site of the proposed new station.

The New Bedford & Taunton Railroad opened for business on July 1, 1840 to significant fanfare which included many local and state dignitaries including the Governor. Joseph Grinnell, the great man of vision who promoted and invested in nearly every civic improvement of the day, was the driving force behind establishing the line. Other prominent investors of the railroad included William Rotch, Jr, John Avery Parker, George Howland, Jr and William W. Swain. The rails for the track were imported at great expense from England but the line from New Bedford to Taunton was constructed in only 18 months. Regular service began on July 2 and included two departures and arrivals per day. The branch line to Fall River was completed in 1876. Eventually, all the assets passed to the Old Colony Railroad and then to the New Haven Railroad. When the NHRR sold the station in the fall of 1959, passenger service ceased from the city.

The first train station built in New Bedford was the Pearl Street Depot, 1840 by Russell Warren (1783-1860). Built in the very rare Egyptian Revival Style, it was referred to as "the tombs." (The Egyptian Revival was a style meant to evoke the grandeur of ancient Egypt and was used extensively in cemeteries. It was used for other purposes but even the most modest cemetery will have an obelisk monument in it.) The relatively small ticket and waiting areas were connected to a long train shed that trailed behind the Pearl Street façade. It was located on the north side of Pearl Street, east of Clasky Park, just before or on the site of the Rte 18 downtown connector. Warren is the architect of many of New Bedford's important Greek Revival buildings including the Joseph Grinnell Mansion on County Street, the Free Public Library Building on Pleasant Street, and the Rotch Rodman House on County Street.

With the city growing rapidly, the old depot became obsolete and was torn down in the 1880s to make way for a large, modern facility. Because the steamboat wharfs were just as important as the railroad for travelers, the depot was constructed closer to the waterfront. This site was part of the harbor that was filled in. It was at the foot of Pearl Street and on the harbor side of Acushnet Avenue. Eight trains each way to Taunton were scheduled at this time as well as four to Fall River.

The new depot was opened on June 21, 1886 and was designed by Henry Paston Clark of Boston for the Old Colony Railroad. It was a large stone structure that had an ample ticket office and separate waiting rooms for men and women each with toilets and large, open fireplaces. Other amenities included a telegraph office, cab or hack stand and baggage facilities. It was a completely modern facility for its day.

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