

MANSFIELD'S BIG DIG: Project changed the town forever and saved lives

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

Major construction on Mansfield's grade crossing elimination project began in the spring of 1955. Since the former Chauncy Street grade crossing was impassable during construction, a temporary grade crossing was built to connect Crocker Street to Allen Street. Another was built to between Oakland Street and North Main. The Central Street grade crossing remained open during the construction of Copeland Drive.

Like Boston's "Big Dig" several decades later, Mansfield's project had to be completed while normal operations continued. As part of the main line between Boston and New York City, the New Haven line could not be shut down. Contractors had to build the underpasses with trains moving above. This process included the installation of massive steel beams to permanently support the railroad overpass. This delicate procedure required close cooperation between the contractor, the railroad, and the state.



Above, the completed underpass project which was dedicated Saturday, June 22, 1957.

On Saturday, June 22, 1957, the town gathered to dedicate the most important construction project in its history. The observance began with a 30-minute parade from the South Common up North Main Street to the Chauncy Street underpass. The day's program was titled "Dedication to Progress," sponsored by the Mansfield Rotary Club under blue skies and an 80-degree temperature. The marching bands of Mansfield and Foxborough High Schools teamed up to play the National Anthem. Dignitaries spoke of the importance of the project for Mansfield and its future. In the early afternoon about 400 people gathered at the Mansfield Municipal Airport for a clambake where they were treated to "breathtaking parachute jumps."



Mansfield's last gate tender, Ted Nelson, worked his last shift on Friday, June 28, 1957, which was captured in an iconic photo by The Mansfield News. [Courtesy/ Mansfield Historical Society]

Mansfield's last gate tender, Ted Nelson, worked his last shift on Friday, June 28, 1957, which was captured in an iconic photo by The Mansfield News. It was clear to see that it was the end of an era.

Six decades later, we are better able to assess the legacy of the grade crossing elimination project. All three underpasses have been prone to leaking, as they fight off the water table. Some find the system of one-way and dead-end streets to be confusing, especially those unfamiliar with the area. The traffic pattern created at Oakland and North Main Street was so unusual that it was returned closer to its pre-underpass state in 2016.

But the project has surely saved lives, time and money. Train and vehicular traffic now flow unimpeded through town. We

can only imagine how bad traffic jams would be today if we were still waiting for trains to pass by. And the former Old Colony line is now a heavily used roadway and a bike and walking path.

But all would agree that Mansfield's "Big Dig" changed the town forever. It would be impossible for historians to pinpoint a day when Mansfield transformed from a small industrial town to a suburban bedroom community. But it just might have been that day in 1957 when Ted Nelson hung up his gate tender's flag for the last time in the name of progress.



Above before and after views of the North Common and the Rt. 106 intersection with North Main Street. The area was transformed by the underpass project which eliminated grade-level train crossings.