

Chester & Becket Railroad

Southeast Becket, near Jacob's Ladder Trail Scenic Highway

The 7-mile Chester & Becket Railroad provided freight services for granite quarries in Becket, for thirty years. The upper quarry only used the railroad for a couple of years. Today, the Chester & Becket Railroad has been abandoned, and the line and the abandoned Hudson and Chester Quarry Co. are preserved as a museum, hiking trail and forest by The Becket Land Trust [[The Becket Land Trust and Historic Quarry & Forest](#)].

The southeast corner of Becket is rich with granite. The Hudson and Chester Quarry Co. operated its open-pit quarry, removing large blocks of granite, from the 1860s to the 1940s; with minimal operations continuing to the 1960s. The much smaller Mitchell Quarry's operation removed smaller blocks of granite to make street cobblestones. James W. Turner cut boulders, called "boulder quarrying," found on his farm into slabs and hauled the rough slabs out by team. One of the earliest Becket open pit quarries was on the Cushman property.

Around 1812, a glass factory was built along the West Branch of the Westfield River and the small community that formed around the factory became known as Chester Factory Village. The Western Railroad reached Chester Factory Village in the 1840's, providing efficient transportation to Boston and Albany, and sparking a new era of growth in Chester, particularly in the Factory Village. The building of the railroad brought skilled stone cutters to Chester to work on George Washington Whistler's keystone arch bridges in Becket and Middlefield. Some of them stayed on after the railroad was built, to cut the granite that was quarried in Becket.

The biggest obstacle to expansion was getting the rough stone, to the Chester finishing sheds. Granite blocks being limited in size, by the weight the horse drawn wagons could maneuver down the steep grades into Chester. In 1898, with the expanding quarry operations and other interests, the towns of Becket and Chester approved bond issues for stock in the quarry company to aid in the construction of the railroad line from Chester to the quarry in Becket.

Some of the stones were finished into monuments and tombstones. The stone was transported into the valley on the Chester and Becket Railroad, cut in a shop near the railroad station, then loaded onto freight trains to be carried to its destination

Shortly thereafter several miles of steep, winding right-of-way were blasted out of the side of the narrow Walker brook valley from Chester to the John Mitchell farm in Becket. At this point the first switchback was located, and rails reversed to climb up the valley side to the sloping upland farmland. The track wound for a mile or so over this rolling ground to a crossing in a dirt road near the old Turner homestead. Here on the left was located a siding, called in honor of its location "Turner's Switch."

From Turner's Switch on up to the lower quarry yard was perhaps another mile. This mile was the steepest pitch on the whole line... The track continued from the lower two track quarry yard on around a curve to where the spur for the upper yard came off. The yard was also just a pair of tracks, with a capacity of four cars. These sidings were maintained by the quarry, under Boston & Albany supervision.

This quarry, the large low quarry, was the old "Hudson and Chester granite Company." Another couple of miles farther over the rough upland plateau, and just beyond the Otis town line, lay another quarry,

smaller, called by old timers the “Bowe Quarry.” This Bowe Quarry had opened in 1890’s and was much smaller than its lower neighbor. To reach this second operation, more railroad was constructed in 1902 or 1903. This line branched off just below the Hudson & Chester’s lower quarry yard to form a second switchback. Then it curled around the hilltop and then headed south, for the upper quarry. It was actually just a long siding, for it had no sidetracks at the end.

The construction of the Chester & Becket Branch Railroad was done with oxen and two-wheeled dump-carts hauled by mules. It was the usual practice for men driving the mule carts to walk, and lead the mules... When the construction crews were blasting a boy would run and dance down the road through the valley while shouting in a sing-song call, “Fire, fire-ooh!” Excerpts from “The Chester – Becket Railroad” by Leonard Holmes Spencer; [A Bicentennial History of Becket Berkshire County, Massachusetts 1765-1965](#); pages 130-131 [Book available for purchase at the Becket Town Hall].

It took an hour and half to two hours for the train from Chester to reach the lower quarry in Becket.

On a September day in 1910, a crowd of people, reported to be 800, 2500 or 4000 by various sources, congregated on the summit of Morey Hill to celebrate a momentous advance in transportation – the completion of the first auto road over a mountain range [[Jacob’s Ladder Trail Scenic Highway](#)]. It was the dawn of the age of the automobile – the crossroads of the supremacy of horse-drawn and rail travel with the infancy of the trolley, motorcar, and airplane.

In 1912, a trans-continental route was proposed by a group of small-town businessmen in South Dakota. Their proposal became the Yellowstone Trail, which spanned the country from Plymouth, Massachusetts to Seattle, Washington. The Jacob’s Ladder Trail was adopted as part of that road system. So, within a couple of years of its opening, the Jacob’s Ladder Trail was part of another “first” - the first auto route across the Northern Tier of the US.

The Chester Granite Company – actually located in Otis – continues to do a good business providing granite curbstones, among other granite products. However, any connection to Chester, other than the name, is lost - the Becket & Chester Railroad that once delivered quarried stone to the stonecutting facilities and freight trains in Chester is long gone, as are the cutting sheds and freight sidings.



Loaded Chester and Becket Railroad car at the Hudson and Chester Quarry.

Photo provided by Leslie Mitchell.

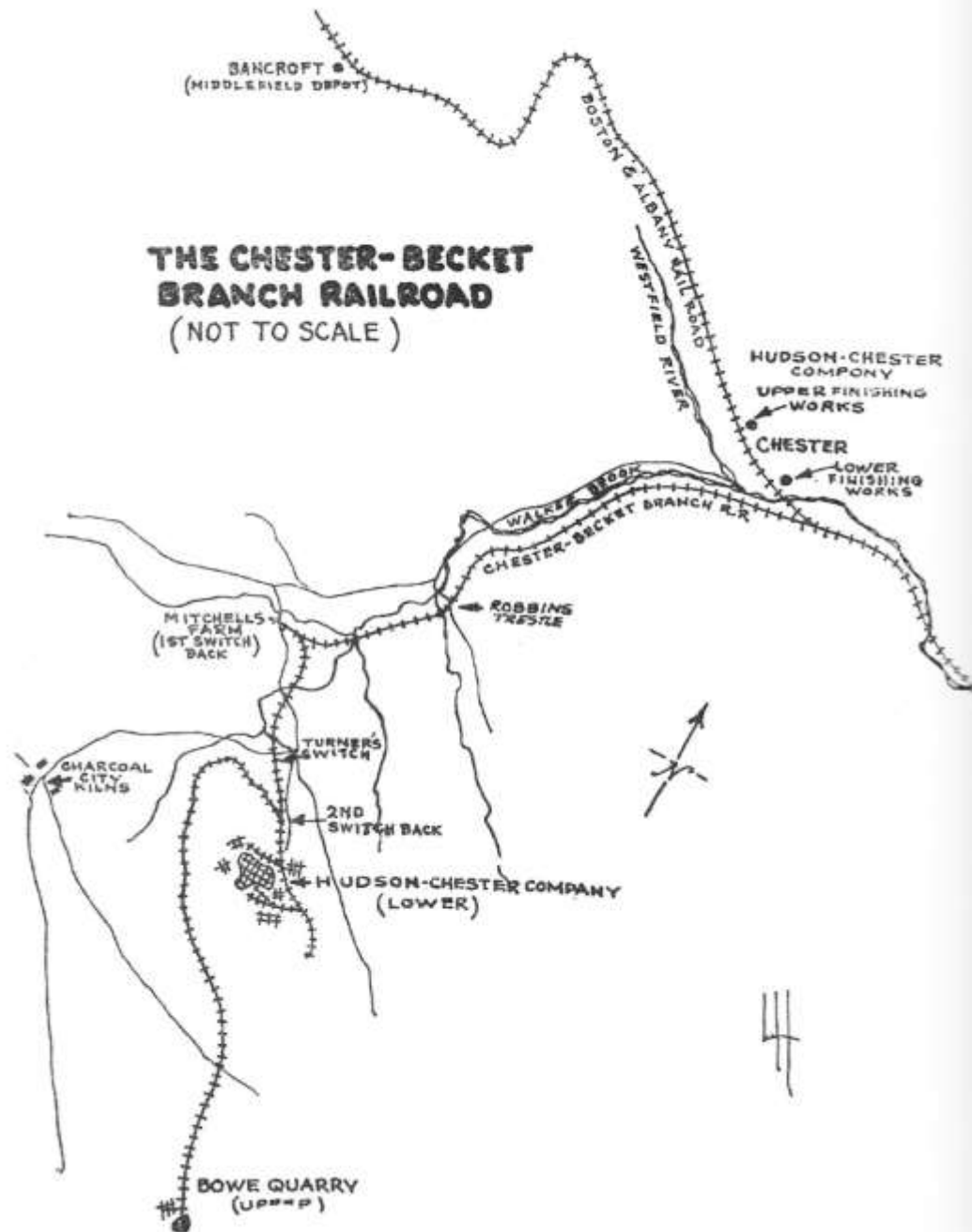


Chester and Becket Railroad cars near the Hudson and Chester Quarry rim. Photo provided by Leslie Mitchell.

In the Spring of 2002, Douglas Anderson, walked the Chester-Becket Railway from Chester to Becket, the following are his photos from this trip.



Chester and Becket Railroad in Becket. Tracks had wire fence on both sides to keep animals and children safe.



Leonard Holmes Spencer; A Bicentennial History of Becket Berkshire County, Massachusetts 1765-1965



Cushman Brook showing old quarry road on top.



Trail above Cushman Brook headed to lower and upper quarries.



Culvert near the Mitchell Switch.



Trail above the culvert near the Mitchell Switch.



Becket Land Trust Historic Quarry and Forest parking area off Quarry Road. Later this was the transfer area for lumber and charcoal transported downhill by trucks before continuing on the railroad. Rita Furlong photo



Mitchell Switch



The raised railbed was laid on top of fill. It was not cut out of the hillside.



Active trail with tire tracks near Becket's present Quarry Road.



Quarry Road in Becket looking toward railroad trail in the woods.



Becket's present Quarry Road crosses trail at top of photo.



MASSPike in distance, near former Bowe Quarry or upper quarry.



MASSPike in distance, extra asphalt from construction was left on a section of the railroad route.



Former Bowe Quarry (upper) now Chester Granite Quarry 2002



Boulder with drill holes demonstrating the “boulder quarrying” method of hand cutting stone slabs.

For further information email the Becket Historical Commission:

historical@townofbecket.org



Trail from Becket Land Trust parking area which heads up to the lower quarry.



Lower quarry, the former Chester and Hudson Quarry, now owned by the Becket Land Trust Historic Quarry and Forest.