

CHAPTER 2

KENTUCKY'S RAILROAD HISTORY IN A NATIONAL CONTEXT

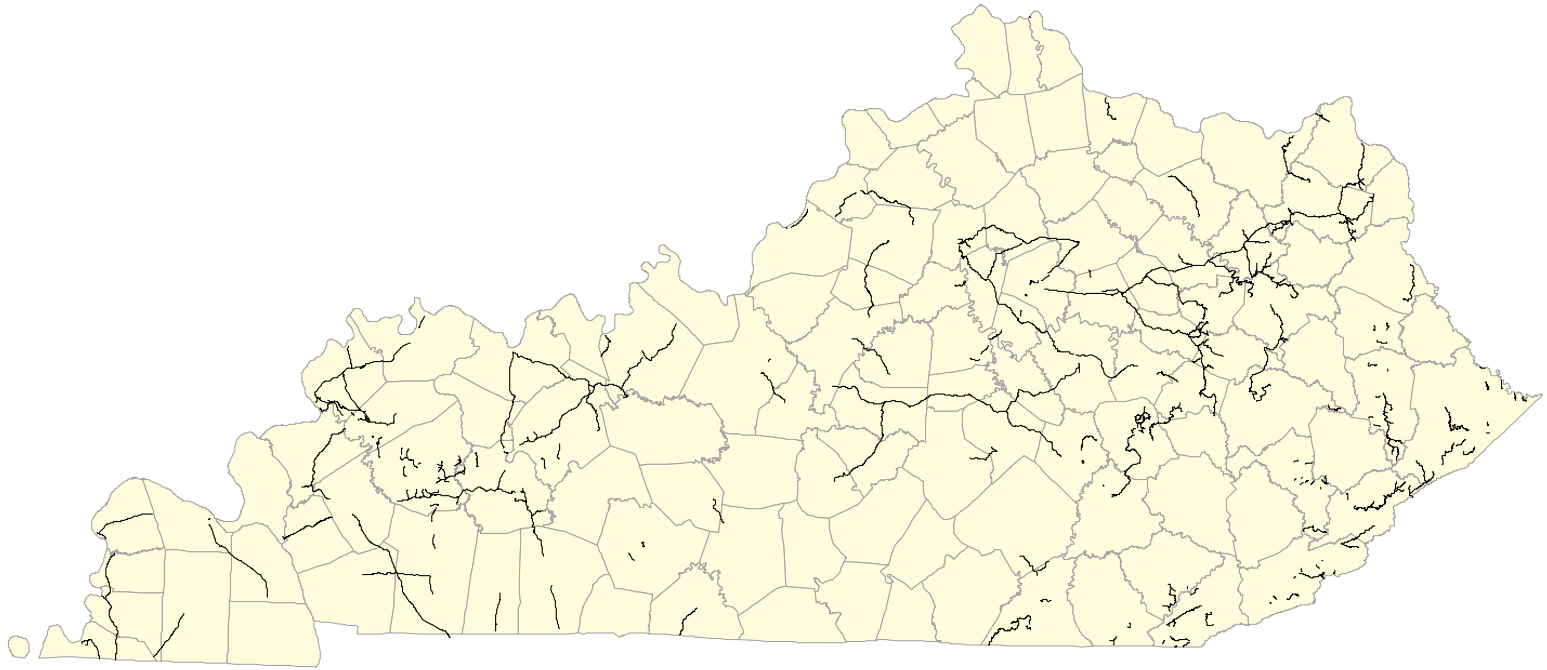


End of the line in Carter County



Former crossing near Greenville

Map 2.1: Kentucky's Abandoned Railroads



0 30 60 Miles

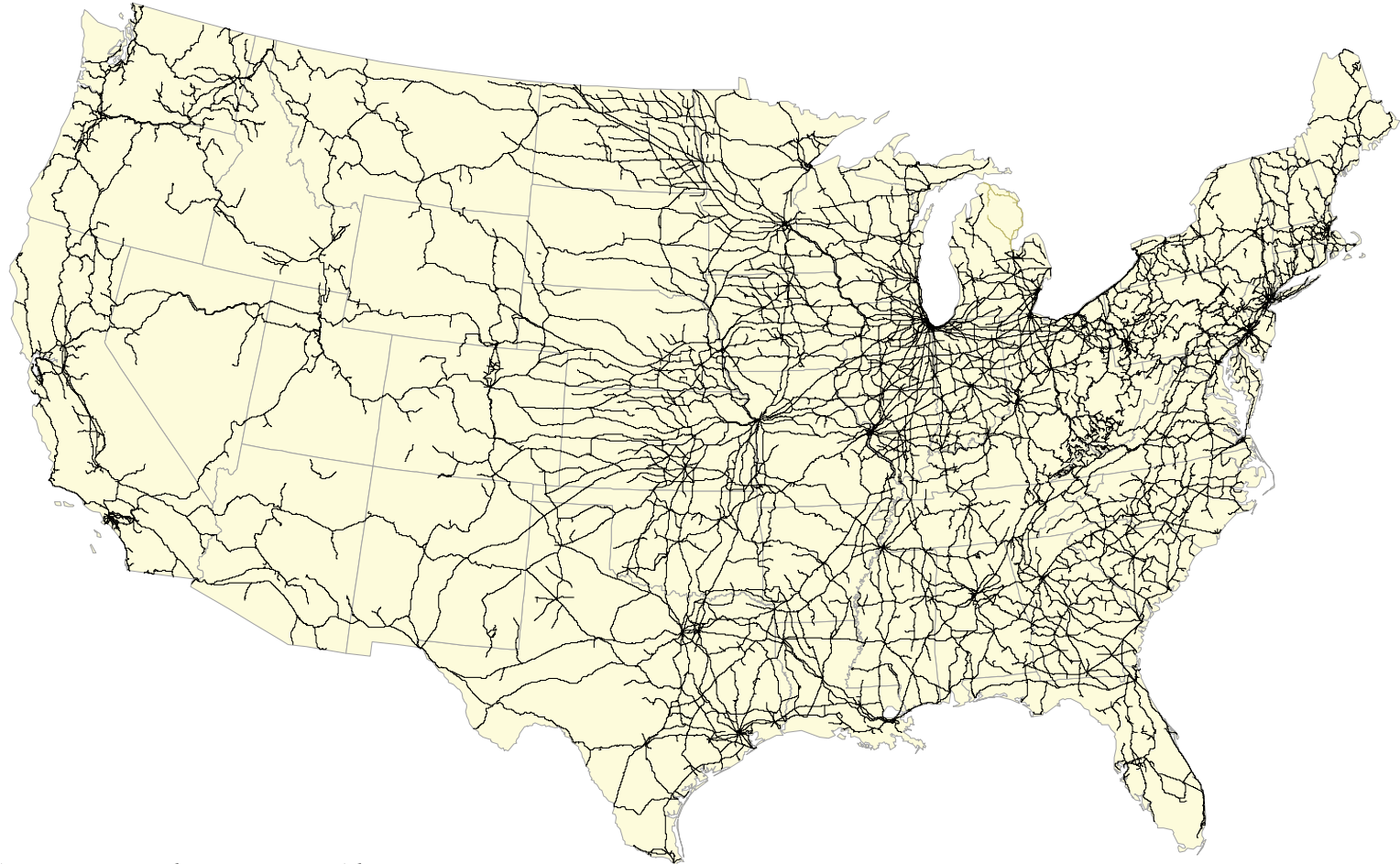


Kentucky has a network of abandoned common carrier mainlines, narrow gauge logging railroads, and short lived spurs that served coal mines. There are lines that were abandoned over 100 years ago and lines that are undergoing the process of abandonment today. Kentucky railroad mileage peaked in 1930 at over 4,000 miles (Sulzer 1998). As of 2000, the state had approximately 2,800 miles of track (Wilbur Smith Associates 2002). Rail mileage peaked in the nation at 254,000 miles in 1916, had dropped to 130,000 by 1995, and now stands at around 120,000 miles of track served by Class I railroads (Schweiteman 2002, Association of American Railroads 2002).

While rail lines were abandoned during every decade since the first lines were built, there were certain eras that stand out with more abandonments. Between 1930 and 1945, 500 miles of railroad were abandoned in the state, twelve percent of the total mileage (Sulzer 1998). During the Depression years many railroad companies in Kentucky became unprofitable and failed. The need for scrap metal during the years of WWII spurred the salvage of functionally abandoned or otherwise marginal lines. The war brought a short-lived increase in business and prosperity for railroads but steady decline returned shortly after it ended.

This activity coincided with the rise in automobile and truck use in the U.S., as more areas became accessible by car and more goods began to be shipped by truck. It is debatable how primary the influence of the auto was on the demise of railroads. Railroad abandonment is a product of a wide array of variables that changed in importance over time and from place to place. These variables related to poor management of the railroad companies, labor issues, changes in markets affecting shippers, burdensome regulation, initial over-construction, and unequal government subsidies to other modes of travel (Black 1975).

Map 2.2: U.S. Railroad Network, 1996



Source: *National Transportation Atlas*, 1998

During the 1970s, the Interstate Commerce Commission streamlined the abandonment process; this allowed carriers to abandon lines more easily and quickly (Schweiteman 2002). Another wave of railroad abandonment came in the 1970s and 1980s as almost all of the major railroad companies in the Northeast and Great Lakes regions faced bankruptcy. The federal response to the crises in the rail industry included the 1973 Regional Rail Reorganization Act, which allowed for the creation of Conrail, a federal corporation to take over operation of seven bankrupt freight lines (these were: Penn Central, Erie Lackawanna, Lehigh & Hudson River, Boston & Maine, Ann Arbor, Lehigh Valley, and Reading) (Schwieterman 2002). This led to further abandonment of redundant and marginal lines. The 3-R Act focused on the bankrupt lines of the Northeast and Great Lakes; the 4-R Act (Railroad Revitalization and Regulatory Reform Act of 1976) addressed railroad issues nationwide. This act mandated public rail planning and made state rail planning a requirement in order to participate in federal rail subsidy programs. This was a change from previous years when the planning of railroad networks was left to railroad companies and to their regulatory bodies. It was apparent that coordinated rail planning at the state and federal levels was necessary because “coordinated federal-state policy featuring large scale public planning for the provision of rail services was virtually non-existent prior to 1973” (Hord1978:53).

The railroad industry was further deregulated in the United States after the Staggers Rail Act in 1980, as the federal government gave up control over pricing and marketing (Association of American Railroads 2002). This act also required the ICC to process abandonments more quickly. As a result of the change in regulations, railroads were able to lower their costs, lower prices for shippers, and increase their productivity and profitability

(Wilner 1997). Because of the drive for greater efficiency and the eased abandonment process, more lines were abandoned during this time.

The 1980s were also a time of important railroad company mergers. Instead of the old way of powerful railroad companies absorbing smaller, weaker lines, now railroad mergers and consolidations were between strong companies. Some of these included the Norfolk & Western and Southern RY to become Norfolk Southern and the consolidation of the Chessie System (C&O and B&O) and the Seaboard System (L&N, Seaboard Coast Line, Atlantic Coast Line, and Carolina, Clinchfield & Ohio) into CSX Transportation (Wilner, 1997). These are two of Kentucky’s major companies today, along with Illinois Central (which itself is a result of a merger with Gulf, Mobile & Ohio and that now has been consolidated into Canadian National) and a variety of regional and small shortline carriers. Map 2.2 shows the current national rail network including Class I carriers, regional railroads, and shortlines. 1996 data was the most recent available in a compatible GIS format.

Table 1: 1920 and 2001 Rail Mileage by State

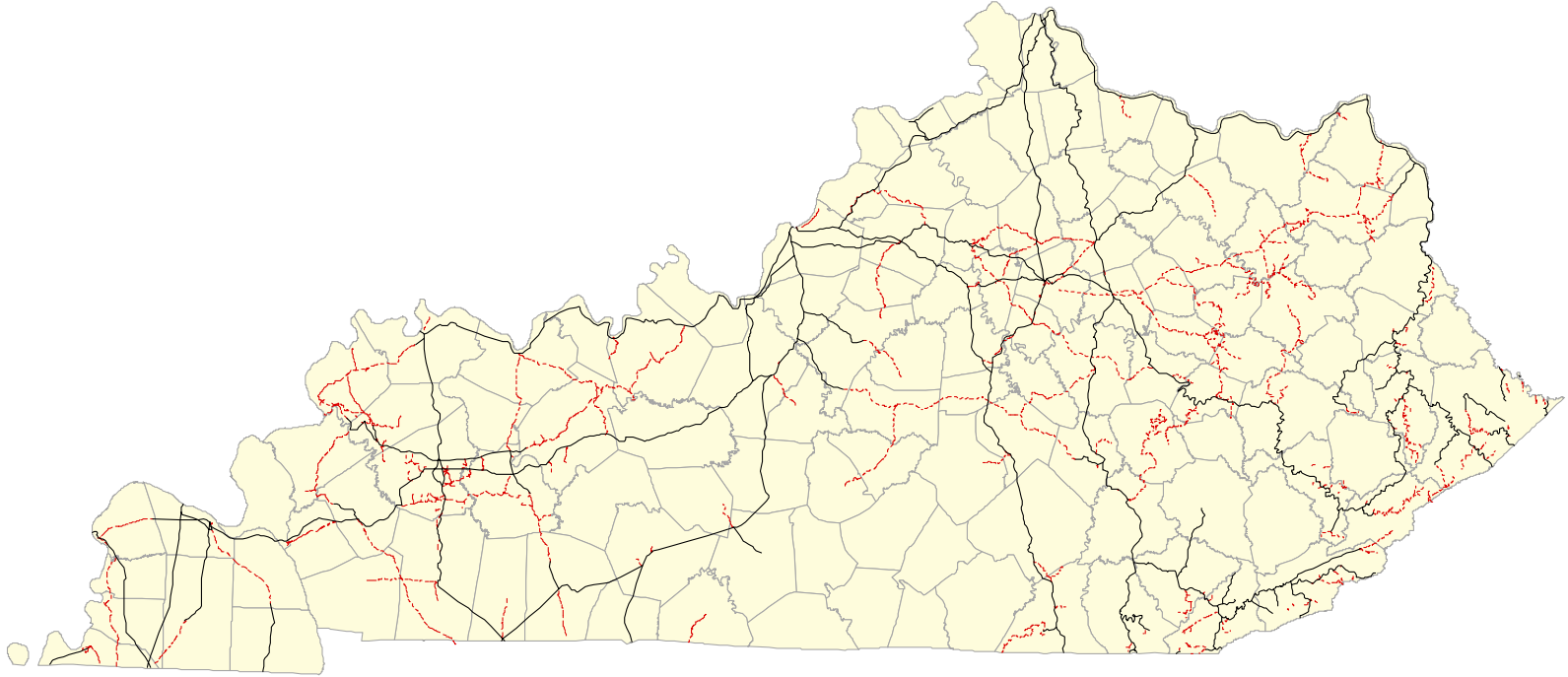
State	1920 miles	2001 miles	% loss
Alaska	n/a	482	n/a
Alabama	5378	3296	39%
Arkansas	5052	2607	48%
Arizona	2478	1855	25%
California	8356	6052	28%
Colorado	5519	2850	48%
Connecticut	1001	635	37%
Delaware	335	227	32%
Florida	5212	2771	47%
Georgia	7326	4795	35%
Hawaii	n/a	0	100%
Iowa	9808	4091	58%
Idaho	2877	1642	43%
Illinois	12188	7197	41%
Indiana	7426	4185	44%
Kansas	9388	5084	46%
Kentucky	3929	2760	30%

Louisiana	5223	2753	47%
Massachusetts	2106	1071	49%
Maryland	1472	760	48%
Maine	2295	1202	48%
Michigan	8734	3699	58%
Minnesota	9114	4504	51%
Missouri	8117	4168	49%
Mississippi	4369	2613	40%
Montana	5072	3293	35%
North Carolina	5522	3251	41%
North Dakota	5311	3795	29%
Nebraska	6166	3480	44%
New Hampshire	1252	437	65%
New Jersey	2352	922	60%
New Mexico	2972	1966	34%
Nevada	2160	1199	44%
New York	8390	3788	55%
Ohio	9002	5484	39%
Oklahoma	6572	3286	50%
Oregon	3305	2334	29%
Pennsylvania	11551	5145	55%
Rhode Island	211	102	52%
South Carolina	3814	2367	38%
South Dakota	4276	1768	59%
Tennessee	4078	2682	34%
Texas	16125	10473	35%
Utah	2161	1443	33%
Virginia	4703	3262	31%
Vermont	1077	600	44%
Washington	5587	3145	44%
Washington, D.C.	n/a	25	n/a
Wisconsin	7554	3478	54%
West Virginia	3996	2433	39%
Wyoming	1931	1904	1%

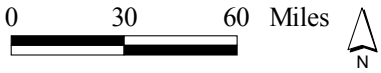
2001 data from Association of American Railroads

1920 data from *The Routledge Historical Atlas of the American Railroads*

Map 2.3: Kentucky's Active and Abandoned Rail Lines



Active rail line
Abandoned rail line



General Analysis of Network of Abandoned Railroads in Kentucky

In response to changes in federal rail regulations, Kentucky began state rail planning in 1978 with the release of the first State Rail Plan. The Kentucky Railroad Commission (it was abolished 2000) was an important force for railroad regulation in the state, but there was little comprehensive planning done before the plans of the 1970s. A short update was added in 1979, but there were no other updates until the 2002 State Rail Plan produced by consultants Wilbur Smith Associates. Their maps and analysis mention both the current abandoned network and also the current and potential rail trail reuse projects. The 1978 plan presents maps and analysis of the existing rail network with a focus on preventing and dealing with light density line abandonments. There are chapters that highlight lines currently abandoned and eligible for federal subsidy, lines that have been indicated on railroad companies' system maps as likely to be abandoned in the next 3 years, and other lines that are likely to be abandoned. Each line is studied with comments on how the services can be stabilized to the point of long-term viability.

There are some geographic and temporal patterns of abandonment that are apparent when the data are mapped. In the northeastern corner of the state most lines were abandoned prior to 1950. These lines served lumber operations and marginal coal mines before the southeastern Kentucky coal fields were opened. Some of them were short branch lines that served small towns. These types of operations quickly became unprofitable as the lumber resources played out, coal mining shifted to the eastern coal fields, and speculative branch lines could not turn a profit from limited shippers and passengers. This era also coincided with the rise of the importance of the automobile. Railroads were in many places the only reliable access to communities. There simply

were no auto roads. As reliance shifted to cars and trucks, railroad lines were abandoned and railroad rights of way were reused for auto roads. This is especially true for lines abandoned before WWII and for lines in more rugged terrain – the rights of way were often the only or best way to get up a narrow hollow.

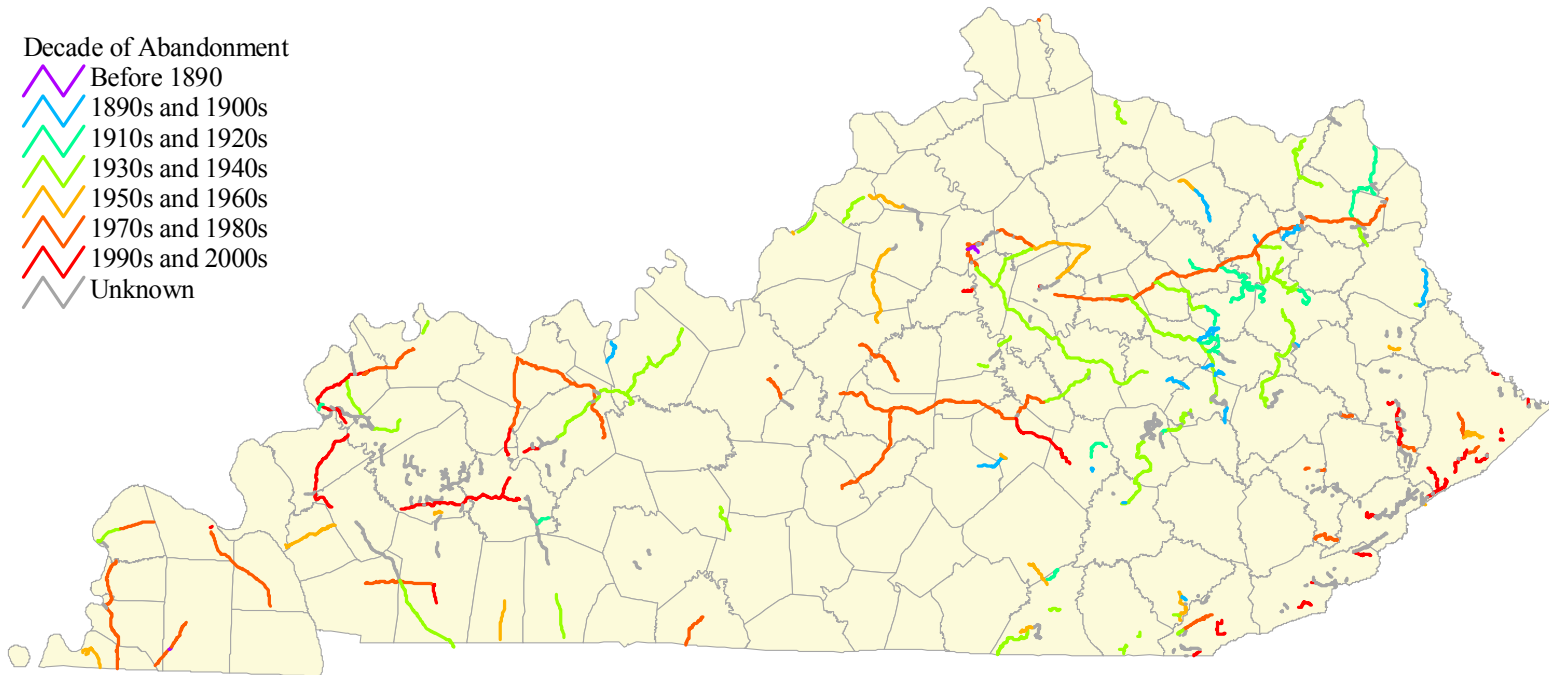
This pattern for lines abandoned pre-WWII is visible elsewhere in the state too. Lines that were abandoned then are likely to be auto roads today. Lines that served small towns at the end of short branches quickly became marginal and were likely to have been abandoned before or shortly after WWII.

More recently abandoned lines are not often made into auto roads of any length, though some are local access roads or driveways, because by the time of their abandonment auto roads had already been constructed - often parallel to the railroad. In these areas the abandoned rights of way often see informal off road use by ATVs or by hikers, bikers, or equestrians. This pattern is consistent across the state.

The most recent and most intact and unobstructed lines have been abandoned in coal areas. As coal production shifts, short branches and spurs continue to be abandoned. Since the 1980s some longer lines were abandoned, both in the southeast coal fields and in western Kentucky. It appears that in hillier areas these rights of way are more quickly used for other purposes like roads and home sites but in flatter areas, there is not as much need for the flat beds and they are more likely to be left intact. Nearly all of the abandoned lines that still have rail on the ground are in the coal fields. Some of these lines are quite newly abandoned and have not been salvaged yet. A few have not seen service in many years but have not yet been officially abandoned, perhaps because there is some chance that the coal mines accessed by the line will again be put into production.











Map 2.4: Rail Line Abandonments by Decade

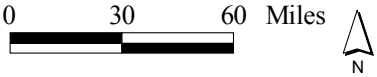
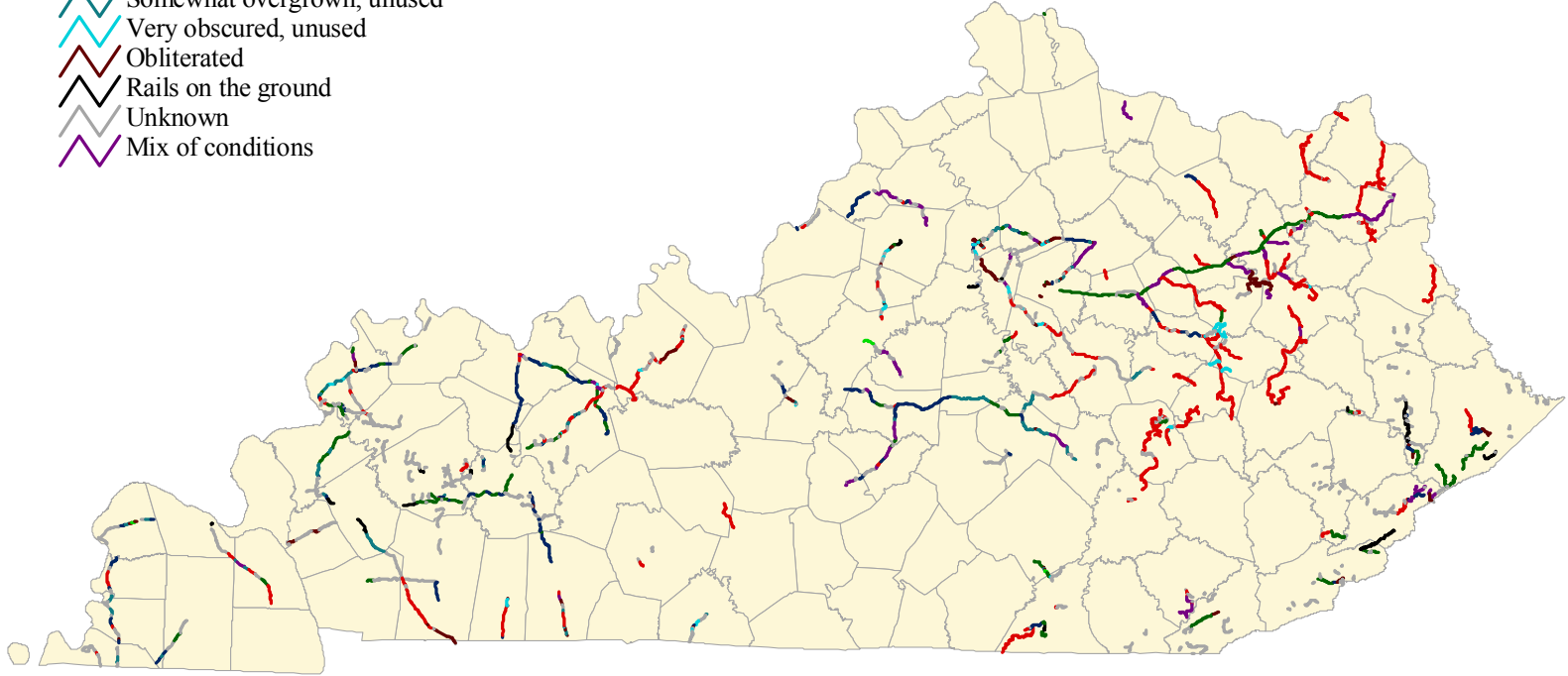
- Decade of Abandonment
- Before 1890
 - 1890s and 1900s
 - 1910s and 1920s
 - 1930s and 1940s
 - 1950s and 1960s
 - 1970s and 1980s
 - 1990s and 2000s
 - Unknown



Map 2.5: Current Use and Condition of Abandoned Rail Lines

Current Use and Condition

-  Auto road
-  Clear path, non-car traffic
-  Overgrown, non-car traffic
-  Clear path, unused
-  Somewhat overgrown, unused
-  Very obscured, unused
-  Obliterated
-  Rails on the ground
-  Unknown
-  Mix of conditions



In addition to the network of abandoned railroad right of way, an array of railroad related structures is the legacy of these cycles of abandonment and the wide variety circumstances under which the lines were abandoned. We discovered a number of tunnels, bridges, culverts, depots, and small railroad artifacts such as mile markers, signals, signs, ties, rails, and spikes. It was a surprise to find so many tunnels, bridges, and trestles intact with potential for reuse and historic interpretation as part of future trail projects. It is imperative that these structures be documented and preserved if at all possible, even if a trail is not built. The locations and descriptions of these point features are noted in the GIS database of abandonments and are presented in list form in Appendix A.

Boxcar in Clearfield, Rowan County



Yamacraw Bridge, McCreary County



Rails to Trails History

The National Trails System Act, enacted by Congress in 1968, created a national system of recreational trails and designated several national scenic and national historic trails. Some of these trails include the Appalachian Trail, the Natchez Trace National Scenic Trail, and the Pacific Crest Trail. The act declared that trails should be established first near urban population centers and secondarily in rural areas to promote preservation of and access to the nation's natural and historic resources.

The National Trails System Act was amended in 1983 to allow for “railbanking”. Railbanking is a way for abandoned railroad corridors to be preserved for future railroad use and in the mean time it allows for the corridors to be used for recreational trails or utility easements. Railbanking in effect delays abandonment indefinitely so that the land moves from railroad company ownership to management by an interim agency. The land is not sold piecemeal nor does it revert to adjacent owners in the case of easements. The managing agency (often a local government or park board) becomes the owner of the right of way.

The first formal rail trail projects in the U.S. began in the 1960s. The Elroy Sparta Trail in Wisconsin and the Prairie Path outside Chicago were some of the first. There were several more rail trail projects in the following twenty years; the passage of the railbanking amendment encouraged the creation of many more.

In 1986 a national organization, the Rails to Trails Conservancy, was founded to help communities through the process of creating trails from abandoned rail corridors. This non-profit organization serves to: promote policy that supports rail trails, provide information and assistance to local trail project groups, and provide leadership and vision to the national trails and greenways movement. To date there are over 12,000 miles of rail trails in the U.S. The Rails to Trails Conservancy has a national office in Washington, D.C. as well as field offices in Michigan, Ohio, California, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Florida.

Kentucky citizens interested in rails to trails organized in 1994 as the Kentucky Rails to Trails Council. There are chapters in the Bluegrass, Lake Cumberland area, Morehead area, Muhlenberg County, and Wilmore. These groups are entirely volunteer

and they are active in building community awareness of Rails to Trails; building support for proposed projects; pursuing funding, planning and design; and educating others on the

Rail Trail in Greenville



benefits of rail trails. To date there are fewer than 15 miles of completed rail trail projects in Kentucky, but there are close to 200 miles in various stages from proposal to construction. Nearly every other state in the US has more miles of developed rail trails than Kentucky (Minnesota, Wisconsin, and

Michigan have over 1,000 miles); many of these states began their first trail projects 20 or 30 years ago. Many states are trying to develop their rail trails into a cohesive network that connects people with recreation areas, shopping, historic sites, other trails and greenways, and also into a network that serves commuters

Table 2: States with the Most Rail Trail Mileage

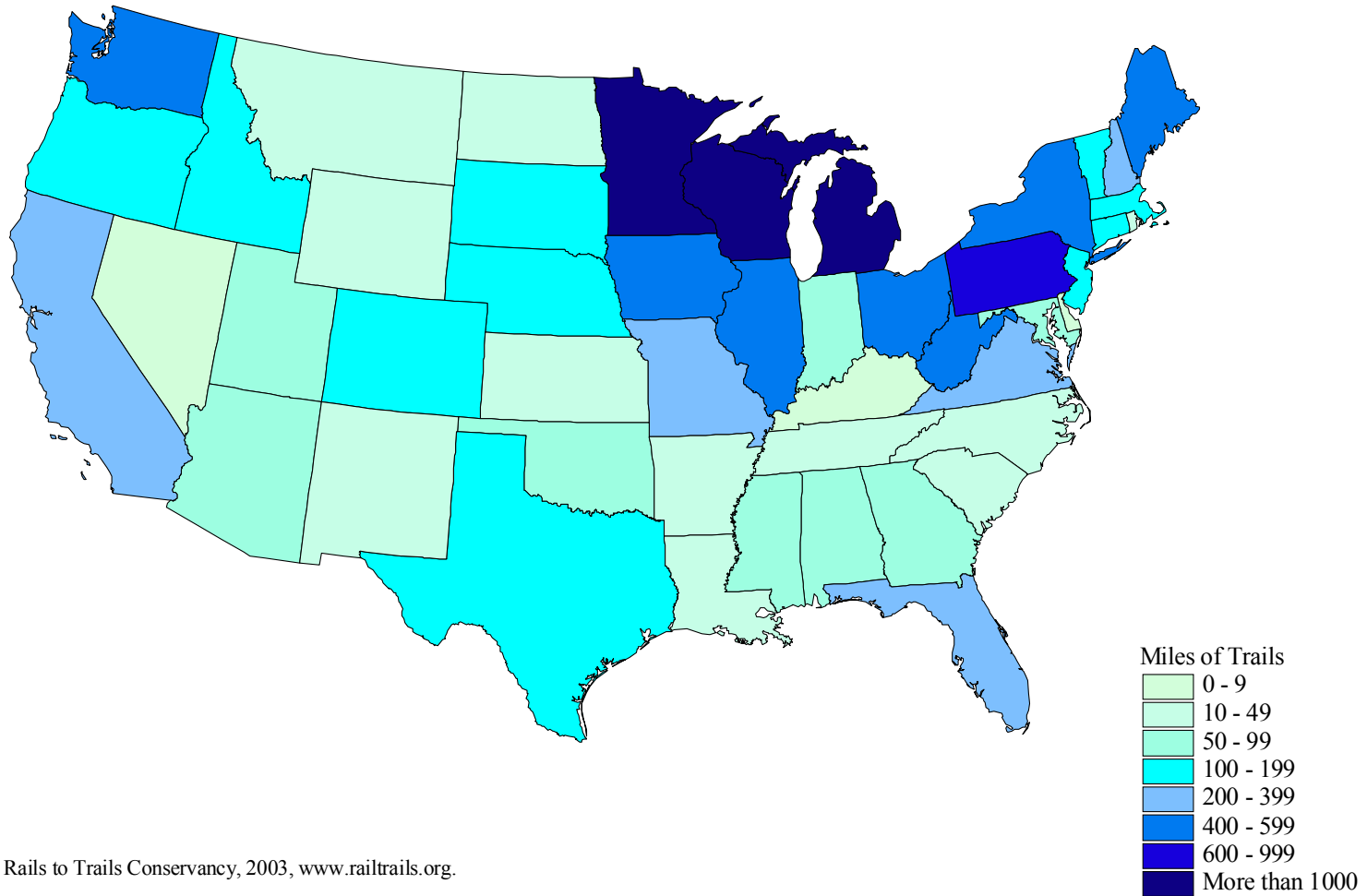
1. Minnesota	1301
2. Wisconsin	1294
3. Michigan	1176
4. Pennsylvania	941
5. New York	553
6. Iowa	546
7. Washington	529
8. Illinois	496
9. Ohio	441
10. Maine	438

Table 3: States with the Least Rail Trail Mileage

49. Delaware	1.75
48. Kentucky	4
47. Nevada	6
46. Alaska	8
45. Arkansas	12.9
44. New Mexico	17.8
43. North Dakota	21
42. Wyoming	22
41. Louisiana	25
40. Rhode Island	31.9

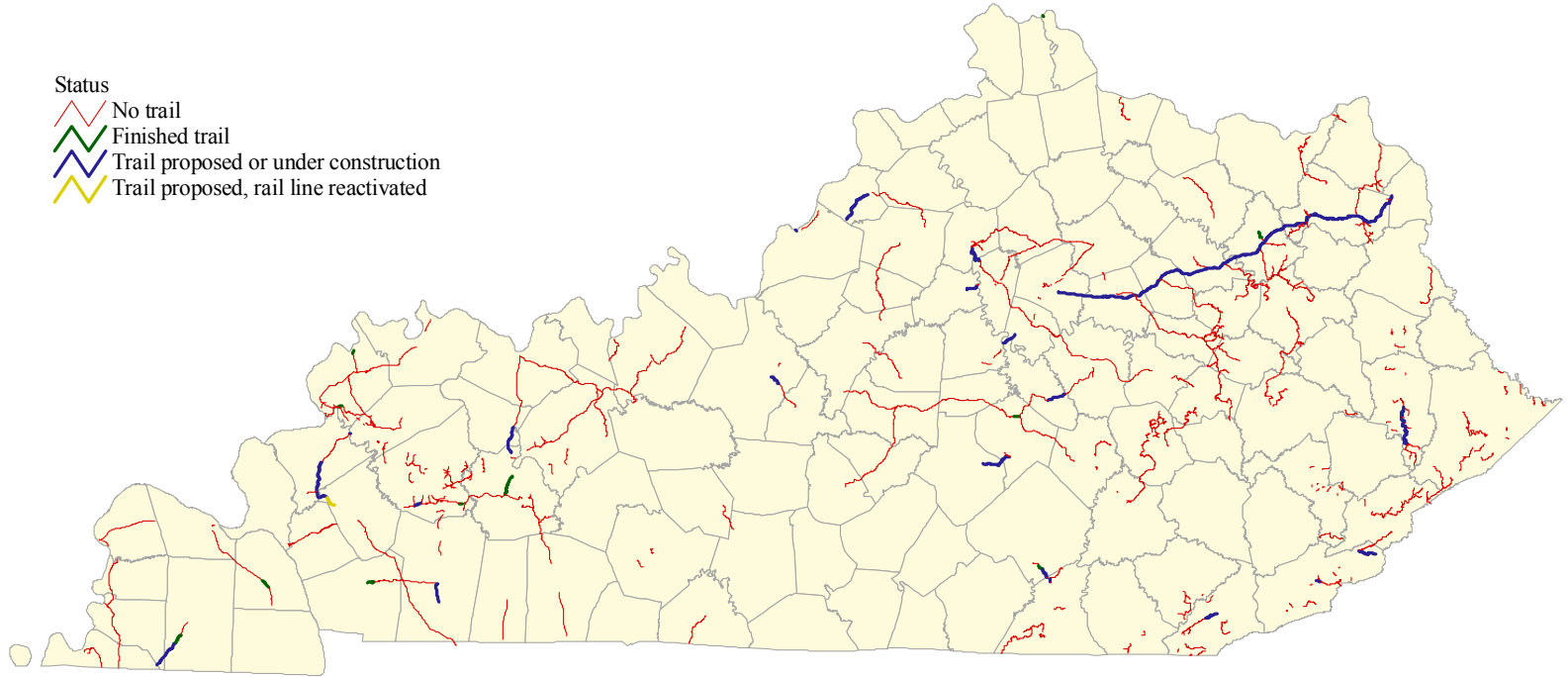
(For these tables we used the rail trail mileage from Rails to Trails Conservancy, which is out of date, but at least it is consistent nationwide. Hawaii has no known rail trail mileage.)

Map 2.6: Miles of Rail Trails, by State



Map 2.7: Rail Trails in Kentucky: Finished and Proposed Projects

- Status
- No trail
 - Finished trail
 - Trail proposed or under construction
 - Trail proposed, rail line reactivated



0 30 60 Miles



Kentucky's first rail trail was the Cadiz Trail in Trigg County. When the Cadiz Railroad was abandoned in 1988 the right of way was donated to the city and the trail opened in 1989. Local residents formed a committee that helped see the trail through the development process. The City of Cadiz took over trail maintenance from the trail committee during the mid-1990s and the committee was dissolved at that time. The trail sees excellent usage and acceptance by the public and strong support from the city, which recently added an extension so that the trail now reaches a shopping center.

At the time of the first state rail plan in 1978, a section of abandoned line in far western Kentucky (between Winford Junction and Columbus) was under negotiations for conversion to a recreational trail and the consultants made a recommendation that this action be pursued based on the proximity of a current bikeway, Belmont State Park at Columbus, and Reelfoot Lake National Wildlife Refuge. It states that local citizen groups were interested in acquiring the right of way and that the Commonwealth was helping to conduct a survey and to determine clear title requirements. The line is not a trail today, but we have no information on what happened to this project. The first state rail plan also mentions the idea of railbanking abandoned lines for future road, railroad, utility or recreational use - five years before the federal legislation instituted an official act relating to railbanking.

We computed a conversion rate that shows what percent of each state's rail network has been reused for rail trails. This rate is based on the states' 1920 rail mileage (near the peak year of 1916) and their current trail miles. Kentucky ranks among the lowest states in terms of miles of the original peak railroads converted to rail trails. Using the data from the Rails to Trails Conservancy, it ranks the lowest of all states that have

any trail mileage, but that data shows that Kentucky only has 4 miles of trails; it now has about 12 miles. It would have been problematic to have updated Kentucky’s mileage without also being able to update the other states, so we used the data as it was given. States that have the highest rail mileage also have some of the highest conversion rates.

It is difficult to determine why Kentucky has so few miles of rail trails in comparison with other states. Some have hypothesized that this is related to a general mistrust of planning and zoning efforts and strong private property rights sentiments. But these sentiments are complex and impossible to quantify or correlate without further survey and study. The opinion of many who have worked on rails to trails efforts in the state point to a lack of coordination between the various agencies, sources of funding, interested citizens, and local and state leaders as the primary obstacle to trail success. It is a goal of House Bill 221, through the creation of the State Rail Trail Development Office, to help to coordinate and encourage these efforts state-wide.

Table 4: States with the Highest Percentage of Peak Rail Miles Converted to Trails

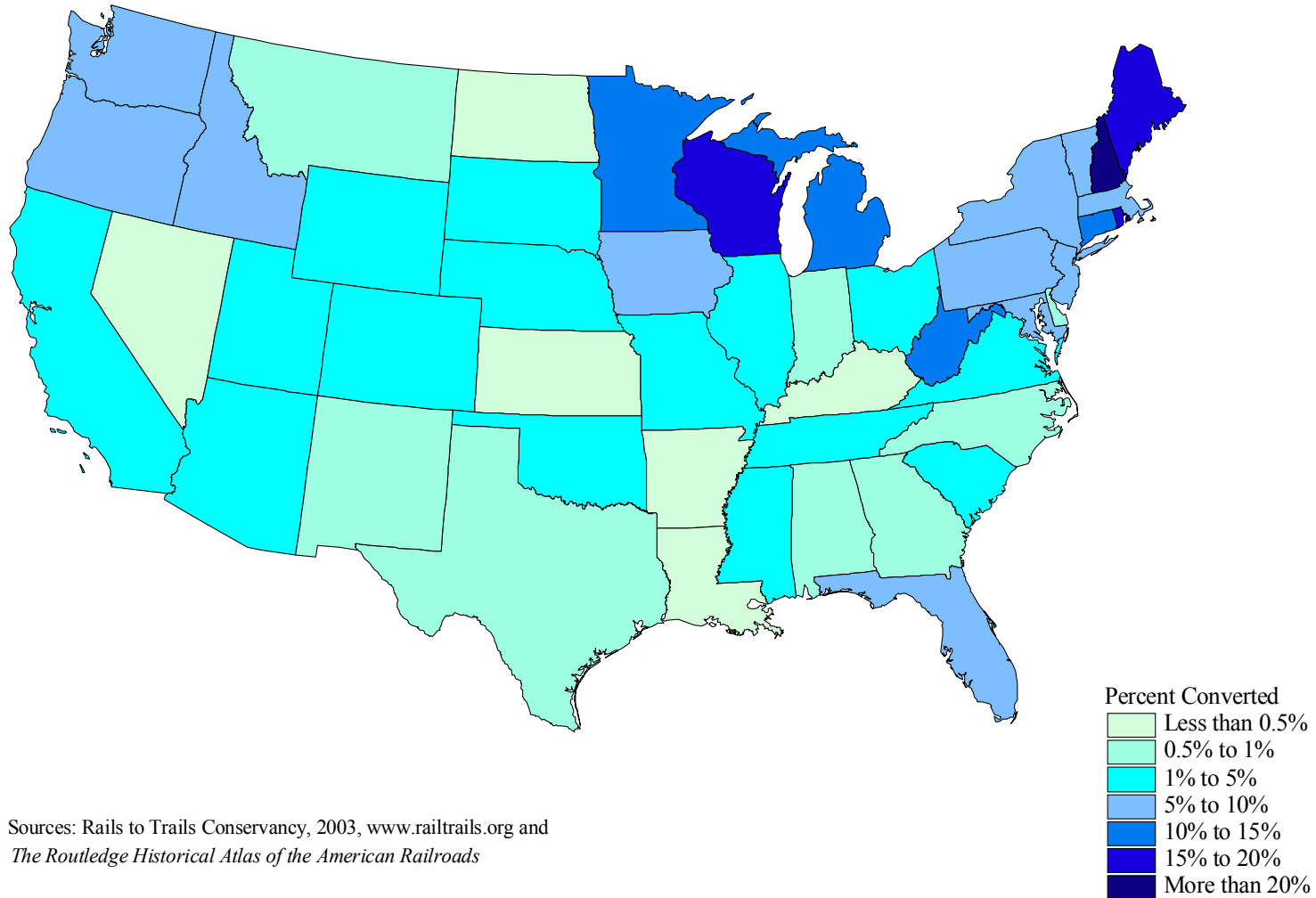
1. New Hampshire	22.96%
2. Maine	19.08%
3. Wisconsin	17.13%
4. Rhode Island	15.12%
5. Minnesota	14.27%
6. Michigan	13.46%
7. Connecticut	12.99%
8. West Virginia	10.56%
9. Vermont	9.47%
10. Washington	9.47%

Table 5: States with the Lowest Percentage of Peak Rail Miles Converted to Trails

48. Kentucky	0.10%
47. Arkansas	0.26%
46. Nevada	0.28%
45. North Dakota	0.40%
44. Kansas	0.42%
43. Louisiana	0.48%
42. Delaware	0.52%
41. New Mexico	0.60%
40. North Carolina	0.68%
39. Montana	0.77%

(For these tables we used the rail trail mileage from Rails to Trails Conservancy, which is out of date, but at least it is consistent nationwide, and rail mileage from 1920, closest year’s data available to the peak US rail mileage in 1916, from *The Routledge Historical Atlas of the American Railroads*).

Map 2.8: Percent of 1920 Rail Mileage Converted to Trails



Sources: Rails to Trails Conservancy, 2003, www.railtrails.org and
The Routledge Historical Atlas of the American Railroads