

E. Moody Boynton: Entrepreneur, Inventor, Orator, Eccentric

Within a year after their marriage in 1832 in West Newbury, E. (for Ebenezer, then Eben) Moody Boynton's parents, [Alfred Boynton](#) and [Abigail Moody, moved with her father Ebenezer Moody and family to Medina County, Ohio](#). This Western Reserve wilderness lay about 20 miles west of Akron. Moody Boynton, "sage of West Newbury," was born there on July 22, 1840, the second of four sons. The family had atomized by 1850, the parents living separately, with the children spread among family members.

When a [young teen, Boynton traveled alone to West Newbury to study at Phillips Andover Academy and live with the prominent Coker family at their Pipestave Hill estate](#) immediately east of what is now Page School. [Susanna Little Coker](#) was related to [George Peabody](#), among the most important self-made entrepreneurs and financiers of the era. In the early 1860s, after a short stint as a [West Newbury school teacher](#), Boynton joined his older brother Alfred, who with younger siblings William and Charles were involved in the lumber trade near Grand Rapids, Michigan.

In late [1866 Alfred Boynton, as inventor \(not Moody as he later claimed\), patented the Lightning Saw](#), whose revolutionary M-shaped teeth cut cleanly on both strokes. Alfred assigned the patent to Moody, whose business skills made this into a highly successful and profitable Brooklyn-based saw and file enterprise.

Although through his business he spent time in New York (and in 1877 the New York Board of Trade selected him to represent that city at meetings of British chambers of commerce in London), Moody Boynton claimed the Coker estate in West Newbury [as his home](#). In truth, it belonged to Catherine Coker until, in failing health, she deeded it to him as trustee for the benefit of his four daughters in 1890. With funds from the saw enterprise, Boynton embarked on local business ventures having mixed outcomes including harvesting [ice on Lake Attitash](#) and the Merrimack, mining [silver in Newbury](#), introducing coal-ferrying [steamships on the Merrimack](#), and constructing a jetty system at the river's mouth. Boynton was also deeply involved in [West Newbury's road cut on Pipestave Hill](#) to make the grade passable by electric trolleys.

In the 1870's Boynton became a passionate adherent of more flexible non-gold-backed monetary policy and labor reform as advocated by the [Greenback](#) third party—which mechanism to smooth devastating boom and bust cycles ultimately became an important tool in managing the U.S. economy. Boynton gave [eloquent populist, anti-monopoly speeches](#) and unsuccessfully ran for Congress in 1878 on the Greenback ticket. [He refused to concede](#), bitterly contesting his loss throughout the entire Congressional term

in question, [finally sending Congress a \\$7,400 bill in 1881](#) for his effort. Meanwhile, in 1880 Boynton ran again for the same seat and again lost.

Also in 1880, Boynton received the [first of many patents](#) associated with the [Boynton Bicycle Railroad](#), a visionary monorail system that promised cost-effective, safe, speedy transport by steam and later electric power on ground level or elevated tracks. For several years in the 1890s Boynton's experimental train ran successfully [near Coney Island and on Long Island](#), receiving engineering accolades and achieving great speeds. But it literally could go no further: the Long Island Railroad prohibited Bicycle Railway crossings over its property. Opposition from the railroads, in addition to Boynton's [refusal to cede](#) majority control, defeated efforts to raise capital.

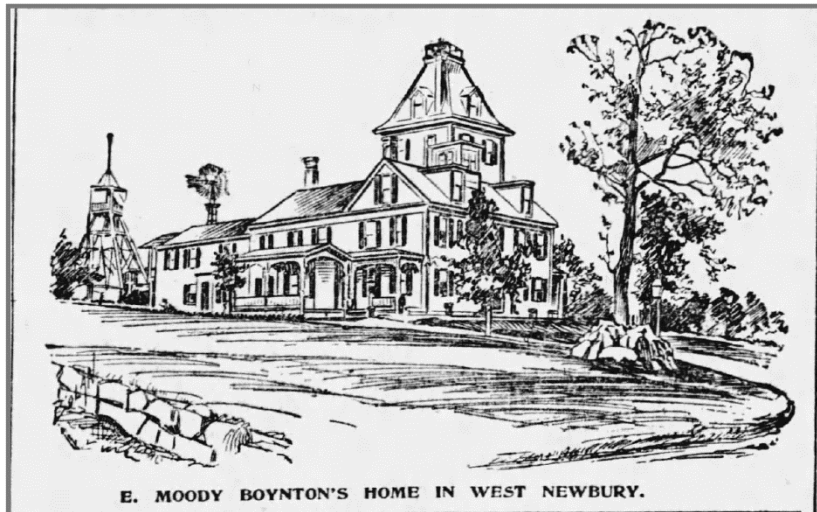
In his pursuit of the railroad, Moody Boynton lost his fortune and briefly, his freedom. On April 4, 1905, Boynton filed a petition for [bankruptcy in Boston](#). He claimed debts of \$106,101 and assets of \$300. Much of his wealth was beyond reach, causing his creditors to charge that he had concealed assets. He described himself as a farmer for purposes of bankruptcy, and upon discharge was found to have just a [dollar in assets](#). Boynton continued his endeavors with the railroad, bankruptcy notwithstanding.

For more than three decades, Boynton petitioned Massachusetts' legislature and state and local agencies as well as the U.S. Congress and Interstate Commerce Commission for support for his railway. In March of 1920, the latter agency committed Boynton to St. Elizabeth's psychiatric hospital in Washington, D.C. on grounds that he [pestered the Commission daily](#) about his railroad. Persuaded by his *pro se* arguments, a jury declared Boynton sane, releasing him at the end of May.

Even as he continued his advocacy for the bicycle railway, Boynton engaged in a robust and unorthodox personal life. In 1899, 1900, and 1901 the [stenographer](#) in Boynton's Boston office, a reportedly widowed Mrs. Charlotte Nickerson of untraceable antecedents, gave birth to three sons. She and her sons lived in Boynton's homes in Boston and [Newbury](#). A couple of months after the death of his wife in 1916, [Boynton adopted the boys](#) (for whom he had long served as guardian), changing their last name to his. In 1921 Boynton married the mother of his sons. The bride was 40 years old, the groom 81.

Boynton's final years were spent in Boston. He died there on March 10, 1927 at age 87. Said the *Boston Globe*, "He made a fortune, but lost it all. . . . But, with all the opposition and disappointment which he encountered, he never lost courage or perseverance."

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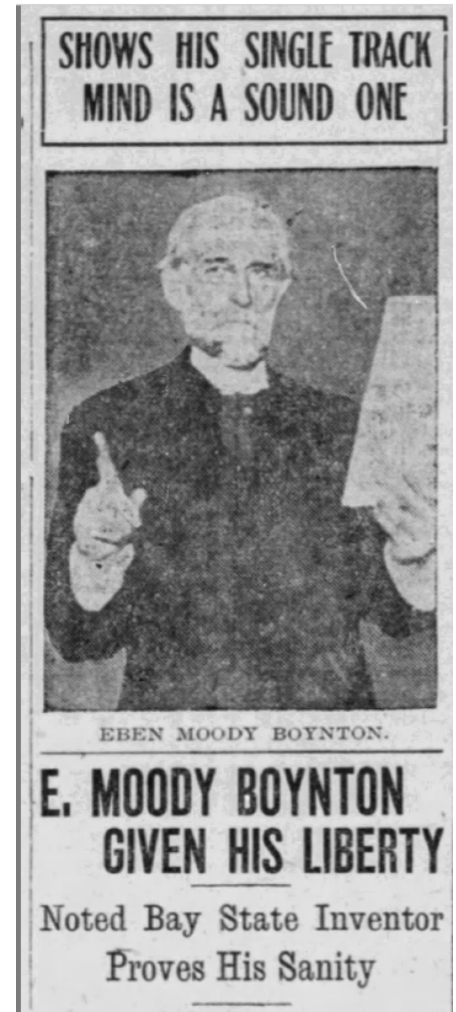


The Boston Globe July 18, 1897

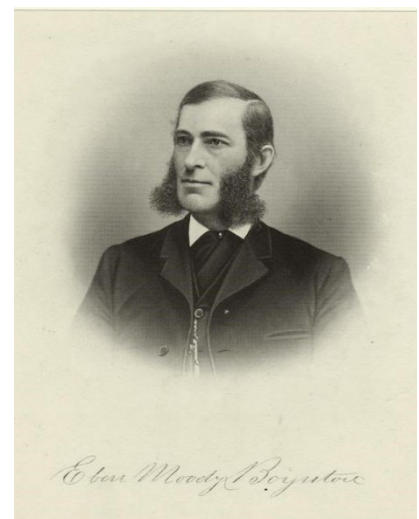


Bicycle Railroad Operating on Long Island

Boynton, Eben Moody, Boynton Bicycle Railway System 1896.



The Boston Globe May 29, 1920



E Moody Boynton, New York Public Library