



Housatonic River Walk Great Barrington, Massachusetts

A Project of the
Great Barrington Land Conservancy
PO Box 1018
Great Barrington MA 01230

413-528-3391

Contact: Rachel Fletcher, Founding Director

river@gbriverwalk.org

www.gbriverwalk.org



Welcome to River Walk,
a greenway trail along the Housatonic River in
the downtown center of
Great Barrington, Massachusetts

Housatonic River Walk reclaims a severely abused section of Housatonic Riverbank in south Berkshire County, Massachusetts, secures public access, and provides a ½-mile riverside walking trail and boat launch. River Walk is located adjacent to Great Barrington's Main Street, yet offers a rare nature experience of river and wildlife views, while celebrating important moments in our region's history. Two thousand two hundred (2,200) volunteers have contributed to this 21-year effort, attracting approximately 5000 visitors/year.

Introduction

Located in the heart of downtown Great Barrington, the Housatonic River Walk is a citizen volunteer effort to reclaim riverfront access from trashed and abused areas. River Walk demonstrates simple, innovative methods to promote biodiversity, enhance wildlife habitat, and protect the river's resources. River Walk traverses a riverbank that once suffered extensive dumping of trash and rubble (including a burned out building), and rampant exotic-invasives growth. After two decades of citizen involvement, this unique ½ mile trail location now affords a rare opportunity to walk along the scenic Housatonic near the water's edge. River Walk's W E B Du Bois River Garden Park celebrates Du Bois' early advocacy of the Housatonic River and is a site on the African American Heritage Trail. River Walk's William Stanley Overlook recognizes an important chapter in Great Barrington's industrial history through the contributions of this nationally recognized electrical engineer.

Volunteers

River Walk was created by community volunteers who live in and around Great Barrington. Since 1988, 2100 volunteers have worked on clean up, construction and maintenance of River Walk, removing over 375 tons of debris, building the trail and planting thousands of native plants.

The work of River Walk began when sixteen volunteers removed fifteen tons of accumulated rubbish and demolition debris from the riverbank behind the building then occupied by The Community Land Trust of the Southern Berkshires. Today, our community of volunteers continues to maintain and reclaim Great Barrington's riverbanks. We work regularly from April through October of each year. New volunteers are always welcome.

How It Started

Great Barrington was built with its back to the Housatonic River, as were many industrial era towns. It was a "working" river, abused by industrial neglect and spoiled by dioxins, raw sewage, PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) and everyday household waste.

In 1978, a building then occupied by Melvin's Prescription Pharmacy was completely gutted by fire. The charred debris was bulldozed over the bank. In 1990, a massive cleanup effort involving 108 River Walk volunteers representing dozens of community organizations removed over 75 tons of demolition debris and storm-damaged trees from the bank. Two years later, the first 136 feet of River Walk trail, a simpler version of what you see today, opened to the public on November 1, 1992.

Water Management

At one time, the river was seen as a catchall for waste. Now it is cherished as a natural treasure with spectacular views and wildlife such as bald eagle, osprey, kingfisher, egret and great blue heron.

Water is conserved along the River Walk, using techniques that slow the rate of storm water flow and cool and clean water before it enters the river. When storm water flows over roofs and paving, it is heated and contaminated with sediments and toxins. When it enters the river, creatures that normally live in cool clean river environments suffer.

River Walk uses several methods to mitigate the detrimental effects of storm water. Drop inlets have been added to storm drains throughout the River Walk, capturing contaminated sediments in runoff before it flows into the river.

Three concrete sculpted Flowforms, inspired by hydrologist Theodor Schwenk and developed by John Wilkes and Jennifer Greene, receive water runoff from a storm drain on Main Street. They direct the flow through a pattern that aerates and helps purify the water before it reaches the Housatonic.

Storage tanks capture roof runoff. Assisted by gravity, the runoff irrigates native plantings on the steep slope above the trail. Downstream, a rain garden in the W.E.B. Du Bois River Garden captures, slows, cools and cleans storm runoff.

Trail Building

Building trails on steep and fragile riverbanks requires special skill and attention. Various techniques are used at River Walk. Cribbing of stone is pinned into the slope; it protects the trail from sliding downhill and retains the uphill grade. Gabions are wire cages filled with stone; they ensure a stable treadway on very steep slopes. Boardwalks elevate the treadway over unstable, steep or wet areas. Gravel and stone dust top dressing are trail surface materials that are economical, easily maintained and well suited to weather extremes.

Volunteers and workers haul materials by hand to the steep site. By doing this work without heavy equipment, they leave the riverbank intact with minimal disturbance. The trail protects fragile riverbanks from erosion and prevents sedimentation in the river by keeping foot traffic off easily eroded soils. The various techniques accommodate site-specific challenges and produce a path that is water permeable. The trail gives everyone safe access to the river and its beauty.

Erosion

Steep riverbank slopes are vulnerable to erosion that can destroy the integrity and stability of the landscape and produce unhealthy levels of sediment in the river. The main causes of erosion are shortcuts heedlessly blazed off the trail and water runoff from streets, rooftops and parking lots. The level, stable trail encourages people to stay off fragile banks where even light foot falls cause soil to slide down. Densely planted vegetation holds the soil in place.

Soil erosion can occur with terrible speed on steep banks. As water is channeled, it first forms a small rill, then an ever growing stream that gains the velocity and power to erode more soil and larger objects such as rocks or tree roots. Our efforts focus on preventing water from channeling at all by dispersing and introducing runoff slowly to an area. On the upstream trail, water

overflow from a rooftop is slowly dispersed through an infiltration trench at the top of the slope. Downstream, we have created a rain garden to absorb, hold, then slowly release water. Throughout the River Walk, dense native plantings slow the flow of water downslope.

William Stanley Overlook

In 1886, electrical inventor William Stanley (1858-1916) developed his alternating-current transformer. His laboratory was in Horace Day's rambling, vacant rubberwear factory, the foundation of which is visible across the river from the Stanley Overlook at River Walk. From there, he ran wires across the river to light stores and offices on Great Barrington's Main Street.

Stanley's innovation allowed efficient, long-distance transmission of power. He went on to establish a manufactory of transformers and other electrical products in Pittsfield in the 1890s and this operation evolved into General Electric. Ironically, a later innovation in power transformers incorporated polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), reckless handling and disposal of which resulted in major contamination of the river. PCB contamination and cleanup continue to be costly, contested issues throughout the Housatonic Valley.

Native and Invasive Plants

River Walk meanders through urban tended gardens and the wild natural world. This can be seen along the downstream section where a split-rail fence divides the trail and riverbank. The areas on either side are managed very differently. On the river side where steep banks meet the water's edge, volunteers weed invasive exotics only. On the path side, they cultivate a public garden of diverse native plants.

In the early stages of River Walk, many plants found here were not indigenous. They have been identified by state officials as invasive exotics, plants that grow so prolifically, they degrade the biodiversity of natural habitats. Our workers remove invasive exotic species without the use of chemicals and replace them with indigenous Berkshire County plants.

Biodiversity

Creating a diverse native plant community is the keystone of our reclamation work. Layered plantings contribute to surface water quality by shading and cooling the river and by stabilizing the bank, preventing erosion and river siltation. Native plants cleanse and take up pollutants and, by replacing non-native invasive plants, increase biodiversity and expand wildlife habitat and food sources. Where we have established successful native plantings, we harvest seeds to expand these areas.

Compost Tea

Most native plants in North American forests have a complex symbiotic relationship with bacteria and fungi that inhabit the soils of healthy forests. This relationship is disabled at River Walk where most of the "soil" is really a compilation of debris, fill and just plain junk.

Aerobically brewed compost tea is used on various areas of the River Walk to develop complex symbiotic relationships present in healthy forest soils. The tea is a coldwater extract of compost. It is essentially a microorganism farm where bacteria and fungi are grown before dispersing onto a crop or soil. The non-toxic tea is regularly tested to assess the quality and quantity of its microorganisms, then applied to the soil to assist plant growth.

Education

River Walk is an outdoor classroom for students from kindergarten through graduate school. We offer tours and lectures about the restoration of riverine environments and town history. Interns from regional colleges assist with all aspects of development and maintenance. While earning credit in their field of study, they learn about the reclamation of riverine ecosystems and the practicalities of maintaining a public space.

From 2006-2009, River Walk is the site of a study about the effects of aerobically brewed compost tea on the plant growth of native species in constructed soils. You may see our biologist and interns hunkered down in the test plots as they count and record every leaf and flower as part of this study. Progress reports are posted regularly on the River Walk website.

W. E. B. Du Bois River Garden

*Rescue the Housatonic and restore its ancient beauty;
making it the center of a town, of a valley,
and perhaps a new measure of civilized life.*
-W.E.B. Du Bois, 1930

The Housatonic River plays a special role in our local and national history. A park entrance to River Walk is located at the corner of River and Church Streets, a mere two hundred feet from where the great civil rights leader W. E. B. Du Bois was born. Du Bois wrote that he was “born by a golden river” and advocated that we “rescue the Housatonic River and create the park it might have been.”

On September 28, 2002 the W. E. B. Du Bois River Garden park was dedicated in recognition of his lifelong passion for environmental justice and rivers everywhere. The W.E.B. Du Bois River Garden is a site on the Upper Housatonic Valley African American Heritage Trail.

Rain Garden

The area surrounding River Walk was once a floodplain, capturing nutrient rich sediment carried by the river. It had many layers of vegetation to hold rain and slow its release onto the ground. The permeable soils of a floodplain prevent flooding by absorbing and holding water before slowly releasing it to the water table. A pristine floodplain is the ideal landscape for keeping water fresh and clean. Today, instead of a rich environment of diverse plants, there is turf grass and hard pavement, which cannot filter runoff or hold floodwater from storms.

We have created a rain garden to help restore the river’s flood plain. The rain garden is an essential feature of the Du Bois River Garden, situated between the street and the river. It is a catch basin where runoff velocity is slowed. Indigenous wetland plants filter and cleanse the water, which soaks slowly into the soil. Any excess water flows into an overflow drain where suspended sediments are trapped. The rain garden produces seeds used to vegetate other areas along the River Walk.

The Housatonic River

The Housatonic River flows 150 miles from four sources in western Massachusetts, passing through the Berkshires and western Connecticut before it empties into Long Island Sound. The watershed, or land area, that drains into the river encompasses 1,948 square miles and includes hundreds of rivers and streams.

From River Walk's canoe launch near Bridge Street, the Housatonic River meanders through oxbows and flats to another canoe access off Brookside Road in Great Barrington, near Eisner Camp.

A Bit of History

An important episode of King Philip's War, which happened at a nearby Mahican ford, is commemorated at River Walk by the stone marker at Bridge Street. In 1676, Major John Talcott overtook and killed a fleeing band of Narragansett Indians who fought the encroachment of European settlers on their traditional lands.

Organization

River Walk is a project of the Great Barrington Land Conservancy. The Conservancy manages leases and easements granting public access to the trail, on behalf of the local community.

For more information about volunteer workdays, internships, educational programs or tours, please contact Rachel Fletcher, 413-528-3391 or river@gbriverwalk.org

Or visit our website at www.gbriverwalk.org