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**The Mill River Greenway Initiative:  
Community-Based, Long-Term Greenway Planning and Design  
In Williamsburg and Northampton, Massachusetts**

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## **1. Introduction**

Puritans first settled Northampton, Massachusetts in the mid-17th century with a vision in mind – that of a well-ordered community in which the Mill River would play an integral part in their lives. So long as the community hewed to the right path, the river would accommodate the community’s needs. Primary among those needs was waterpower, so the anchor sites for development along the river were the falls. Over the next 200 years, as the Puritan mind metamorphosed into an American industrial mentality, the Mill River’s residents created an industrial necklace with mills and factories decorating a ribbon of water. By the mid-19th century, more than 70 mills and factories were established along 15 miles of river from Northampton’s Lower Mills up to Devil’s Den near the headwaters of the river in Goshen. By the mid-20th century, with the Mill River Valley’s industrial base in rapid decline, the necklace deteriorated into a sad scattering of empty factory buildings with little connection to one another. The vision perished and the river escaped the minds of most residents, especially in Northampton where the Corps of Engineers relocated its flow away from the town center.

Industry along the river is all but gone. Relic industrial sites now dot the Mill River’s banks, separated by flat stretches of the river that were never appealing for water-powered manufacturing. Though more prone to flooding, many of those stretches have been developed as recreational destinations. The Daughters of the American Revolution (D.A.R.) State Forest in Goshen and Look Park in Florence are just such places, but substantial inaccessible gaps remain between the old factory sites. The factories turned their backs to the river, severing any remaining connection to residents and visitors. There cannot be a true, continuous greenway if these key spots are not renewed and connected. The industrial sites themselves, called “anchor sites,” can serve as gateways and destination points along one continuous greenway, providing access to the stretches of river between them.

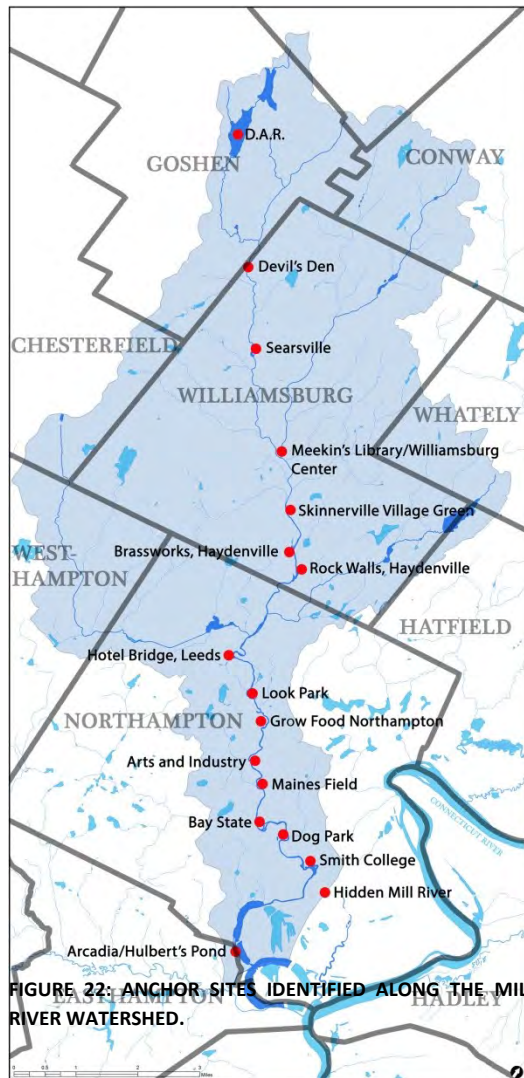
A few anchor sites have been resuscitated or renovated, such as Meekins Library in Williamsburg Center and old mill buildings in Florence. People are returning, but the ways in which people and these sites relate to the river need to be addressed so that people can come back and reconnect to the river at historically and geographically significant locations.

The Mill River Greenway Initiative is the story of a renewed vision, which, like the original, is being pieced together by individuals and small groups -- the creation of a new kind of necklace composed of those same sites at falls and bridges, which, when linked, will provide fulfillment for walkers, naturalists, and anglers, history buffs, artists, and tourists. The river will, once again, play an integral role in the lives of residents.

## 2. Geography of the Mill River Watershed

Tumbling out of its headwaters at almost 1,500 feet above sea level in the hilltowns of the Berkshire Hills in Western Massachusetts, the Mill River's east and west Branches drop 900 feet and converge at the center of Williamsburg. The topography then flattens out, and, after two more dams at waterfalls, flows into the agricultural fields of Florence Village in Northampton. After one more dam site in Florence, it continues through another old industrial site to Paradise Pond at Smith College. Just past Paradise Pond, the Corps of Engineers diverted the river in

1940 away from the center of Northampton, but the palimpsest of the former Mill River remains in the city center. (*nb. A topo map of the watershed will accompany the presentation and available in the final version of the paper.*)



## 3. Mapping out The Sites

Along the entirety of the Mill River there exists a rich collection of identified sites and spaces, all highlighted for their historic, recreational, educational, and environmental value. The anchor sites have either actual or potential value for residents and visitors while the connections are linear paths, walks, and multi-use trails that run from one anchor site to the next, allowing for continuous access and recreation. The Mill River Greenway Initiative envisions joining anchor sites and connections to create one complete Mill River Greenway.

Each site and connection bears the stamp of its own personality. The headwaters from the hilltowns to Searsville in Williamsburg offer splendid hiking, camping, and multi-use trails, starting with the D.A.R. State Forest and Devil's Den. This area also includes the Williamsburg Reservoir, where a terrible flood in 1874 wiped out the dam and bridges – even one whole village – the most devastating dam disaster to that point in American history. The second distinct area starts in Williamsburg Center and runs along Rt. 9 to Haydenville, Williamsburg's

southernmost village.

The Mill River is Williamsburg Center's signature feature. It rushes under bridges and alongside houses, lapping against the sides of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century stone walls that border and guide it. Landscape architect Nick Dines took advantage of the site to establish a small park at Meekins Library, in the center of town, which created an opportunity for a weekly farmers' market. The riverfront park at Meekins sets an example for other significant and historic points along the river to foster a connection between building, land, and river in order to reinforce the

connection between the people and the river, to act as a destination and entry point to a continuous experience with the river.

Haydenville is the next anchor point, home to historical buildings including the Brassworks, a beautiful old mill site that has been revitalized for business and commercial use with great potential to take advantage of its riverside property like the Meekins Library. Then comes the former site of Skinnerville, destroyed in the 1874 flood, with its popular community space, snack bar, and ice cream stand. The Williamsburg Greenway Committee (see below Section 4.e) has almost completed a study to connect these anchor sites with a multi-use trail, thereby creating one fluid opportunity for access and recreation along the river, turning the community's focus back toward the river that was once such a vital part of the town's existence.

Near the Williamsburg/Northampton town line is a walking trail along the former rail bed that connects to a multi-use path in the village of Leeds, another 19th-century mill town with historic sites, such as 3 dams and the Hotel Bridge. Leeds is ripe for development as an anchor site.

The river's path then flows between two key features in the village of Florence -- a multi-purpose park of regional importance called Look Park and large open fields devoted to community agricultural and town-owned athletic fields. The agricultural land is owned by Grow Food Northampton, a private non-profit devoted to food security and overcoming the barriers of farm entry in densely populated areas. Grow Food Northampton manages and leases out the land to a number of agricultural ventures on multiple scales. Two private farms lease out 108 acres of the 181-acre site. The City of Northampton leases 7 acres of its land to members of the Florence Organic Community Garden, and the city's recreation department is in charge of the athletic fields. A few more acres are set aside for micro farm ventures and all the land directly abutting the river is conserved riparian zone, a mile-long section with opportunities for environmental education.

The river immediately enters another industrial area, flowing by the old mills of Arts and Industry and Nonotuck Mills, a half-mile-long reach of major historical importance, including abolitionist and Underground Railroad sites. Arts and Industry is one of the most impressive mill sites along the river today, now home to businesses dedicated to arts and crafts, education and health, with studio spaces for over 50 local artists. Just downstream is a historic dam with a fine renovated mill building that houses businesses and a large practice floor for roller derby. Just south of these mill sites is Maine's Field, a popular park, swimming hole, and baseball diamond. Another quarter mile downstream is the last industrial site with extant factory buildings, called Bay State. One such building still houses a manufacturing concern, while the other hosts a number businesses and creative ventures.

The last portion of the river is a rich mix of recreation and education, starting with trails at the bottom of a hill called "Hospital Hill," the site of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Northampton State Hospital, demolished in 2006. Several trails along the river, popular with dog-walkers, who call it "the Dog Park," lead to Smith College and Paradise Pond, a heavily used recreation spot for students, residents, and tourists, especially Smith alumnae. Paradise Pond has had a mill dam since 1666, the most important mill site during the first 200 years of Northampton's colonial settlement. Downstream, the Army Corp of Engineers diverted the river away from central

Northampton in 1940, but the bike path, which now occupies an old rail line, follows the original course of the river, now called the Hidden Mill River. The Hidden Mill River offers a unique opportunity to combine recreation with education, and bring to light the layers of history that have left the downtown as it appears today. The currently diverted flow of the Mill River then finally empties out into Hulbert's Pond in Mass Audubon's Arcadia Wildlife Sanctuary in Easthampton, which offers wonderful opportunities for recreation, as well as habitat and wildlife education. During seasonal high water, a two-mile-long paddlers' trail is available that runs from the wildlife refuge through the floodplain forest to a barrier under a bridge at the end of South Street at the southern end of Northampton.

#### *4. Players and Process*

##### *a. Historical Roots*

Beautification schemes for the Mill River cropped up in the last quarter of the 19th century at the height of the river's industrialization when a "Paradise Park" plan was proposed in the 1880s and Smith College hired Olmsted, Olmsted and Eliot to plan its campus. Then, just 2 years prior to the great flood of 1936 and hurricane of 1938, Gerald Stanley Lee, a well-known local resident, wrote a full-blown proposal for a Calvin Coolidge Riverpath Park. After the river diversion in 1940, no further thought was given during the next generation. Since the 1970s, however, the city of Northampton has produced a number of planning documents to return the river to the life of the city. Northampton's city planner, Wayne Feiden, has been acquiring open space along the river in Northampton since the 1990s, labeling each new acquisition as part of a Mill River Greenway. Meanwhile, in Williamsburg during the late eighties and early nineties, private property rights advocates waylaid an attempt to extend Northampton's multi-purpose path along the former rail line.

##### *b. MRGI – The Mill River Greenway Initiative*

In 2010, some three dozen residents of the Mill River Watershed, with backgrounds from the blue-collar trades, the ecological and design professions, and staff from governmental and non-profit agencies met to discuss the possibilities of a greenway. In spring of 2011 MRGI built a website and asked the general public to join in designing and building a greenway with the ultimate goal of creating access and a series of riverwalks and bikeways that would connect the length of the Mill River.

Two co-moderators emerged from the MRGI membership, one in Williamsburg, a town of 2,500, and one in Northampton, a city with almost 30,000 people. While MRGI has no structured organization (just 2 moderators and 110 members), it does have an umbrella group for 501 non-profit status. On the website, the moderators update events and projects along the length of the river, mindful that the ultimate goal is to connect the dots, to link the projects together, and reconnect the people to the river. Projects emerge from the interests and efforts of local residents, some initiated or nudged along by MRGI and some not.

##### *c. Smith College – The River Runs Through It*

Smith students have a long history of engaging with Smith's frontage on the Mill River, which includes Paradise Pond. Both the Pond and the river have been sites for active and passive recreation, field research, ecological academic pursuits, and artistic inspiration. Recent projects include mapping storm water outflows and invasive species, community workshops to learn

about invasive species removal, native planting plans, broad-scale planning, and adaptive reuse and site redevelopment of historic industrial sites along the river.

Since 2010, Smith, students from two scholarship programs have engaged directly with MRGI to support the establishment a *Greenway* along the Mill River. Students have provided design and planning services for the Williamsburg Greenway Committee's multi-use path between the villages of Williamsburg Center and Haydenville and have conducted field work and developed new layers of data for use in Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping applications. These same students are also working with MRGI and a design professional to develop interpretive brochures for self-guided walking tours of the Mill River. Finally, Smith students in landscape design courses have produced several reports on the river.

#### *d. The University of Massachusetts*

MRGI has also facilitated design studio work from students at the University of Massachusetts Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning. MRGI and these design programs have developed a mutually beneficial relationship that will lead to a well-conceived greenway plan that will benefit the watershed and leave a legacy of good town-gown relations.

#### *e. The Public Process in Two Communities*

In 2012, MRGI members successfully requested the Williamsburg Board of Selectmen to create a special Mill River Greenway Committee to explore the feasibility of linking together the two village centers with a multi-use path. The Williamsburg Greenway Committee followed on the heels of a collaborative town-wide envisioning process, which placed the Mill River at the center of future planning efforts. The path will create access to the Mill River, allow students and residents a safe path between villages, encourage the preservation of cultural and natural features, and help concentrate village growth close to the corridor, relieving development pressure on open space. Finally, a multi-use corridor will serve as a spine for the network of trails that Williamsburg's Woodland Trail Committee has been steadily developing throughout the town, paying homage to the town's rich history and scenic woodlands.

Meanwhile, in Northampton, the Director of Planning and Development, Wayne Feiden, has guided the city's acquisition of land along the Mill River, culminating in 2011 with the purchase of the 181-acre site in Florence co-owned with Grow Food Northampton. A host of potential Mill River initiatives await realization between a series of anchor sites: nature study and cultural conservation in Florence, walking paths from Bay State down through Northampton, and scientific study opportunities throughout the corridor.

#### *5. Realizing the Power of Collaboration: Site Design at a Historic Mill*

MRGI can draw on the resources of the of the Pioneer Valley's Five College Consortium, which includes the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, as well as Amherst, Hampshire, Mount Holyoke and Smith Colleges. Collaboration between MRGI and institutions of the consortium, particularly Smith College, has led to more than a score of research projects and design proposals addressing the visions of a Mill River greenway. Two recent student projects, one from the University of Massachusetts and one from Smith College addressed the Arts and Industry building in Florence, one of the key anchor sites along the Mill River, assessing current conditions and offering comprehensive plans to revitalize the area and reconnect it to the river.



Scott Fulford, a graduate student in the Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning Department at the University of Massachusetts, examined the cultural, recreational, and ecological significance of a spot he called “Florence Point” that lies at a node between two 19th-century factory buildings. He described the history and current uses of the site, including business and commercial areas, bus and bike routes, and the dam and falls. He then offered several schemes for the redevelopment of the area, with a park as the key feature in the now vacant land adjacent to the pool above the falls. His proposal turns Florence Point into a legible landscape that signifies a culturally rich and community-centered space. Florence Point has the potential to act as a node, Fulford’s word for a gathering point and gateway to riverside recreation and the larger Mill River Greenway.

Sophia Geller (class of 2013) in the Landscape Studies department at Smith College, addressed the same site for a project in a broad-scale design and planning studio in the fall of 2012. After assessing the ecological, physical and cultural realities and potentials of the site, she created a series of bylaws which would promote ecologically responsible storm water management and public access to the riverfront. Her proposed bylaws offered increased opportunity for mixed-use development and the building of new structures in exchange for publicly accessible recreational spaces directly abutting the river, while simultaneously catching and filtering storm water runoff and decreasing the total amount of impervious surface on the property. Geller’s design concepts allow people to re-engage with the historic Mill River through entry points to experience more thoroughly the landscapes of their towns.



FIGURE 23: INACCESSIBLE AND UNUSED PORTION OF THE ARTS AND INDUSTRY SITE ABUTTING THE RIVER.



FIGURE 3: EXAMPLE PROPOSED BY GELLER OF A RIVER WALK ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC.

*Conclusions*

*a. The Process*

- MRGI gathered together a group of local residents who cared deeply enough about the place in which they live to attend 3 or 4 meetings a year and contribute whatever time they had available.
- We asked our members to develop an overall vision for a Mill River Greenway.
- We prepared a long list of projects, from mapping and photographing to writing and designing and then encouraged members to participate in whichever ones they wished.
- We ensured that every member had a chance to match his or her skill and interest with a particular project.

- We developed an attractive website and gave annual parties.
- We approached every person who might help the cause of the greenway, especially politicians, colleges and the university, and staff in local, regional, and state government departments.
- We incorporated projects that others had initiated into our greenway plan, making sure to give them credit and exposure.

### *b. Lessons Learned*

The MRGI moderators came to the initiative with some lessons already learned and others instilled in them over two years of patiently piecing together the wherewithal to fulfill the greenway vision. We had read well into the enormous literature on community-based, collaborative planning and design approaches, of which Steinitz's recent *Framework for Geodesign* (2012) is a fine compendium of examples. Like most such initiatives, however, MRGI cobbled together the sources of success from the ground up rather than starting with an established framework.

Following are some lessons learned during the *ad hoc* process MRGI engaged in:

- *Shared Passion.* The process must begin with a passion for the place in which one is working, more specifically, a passion that other residents share.
- *Leadership and Vision.* There must be leaders who are in it for the duration of the project, generally at least 5 years. The leaders' vision must be clear and derived from the shared passion. In the case of MRGI we can actually envision what a greenway would look like on most reaches of the Mill River.
- *Expertise.* Without expertise the chance of success is small.
- *Expectations.* Be realistic in your expectations. The usual rule applies – 10 or 20% of the people do 80 or 90% of the work.
- *Homework.* Do your homework about the place, do a great deal of research, interviewing, and interrogation. Know what you're talking about, whether it's history, natural phenomena, or the political climate
- *Historical Awareness.* (Part of your homework) The place you're working with did not hatch out of an egg. Others have had visions of that place, often generations back. Find out about them.
- *Humility.* ...but don't assume you'll ever know it all – to assume makes an ass out of u and me.
- *Patience...* a lot of patience.
- *Rewards.* Don't expect them. When and if they come, relish them.

### *c. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Process*

We consider a tiny budget, flexibility, and time our greatest strengths. We can get by on very little money because we have thus far remained primarily advocates rather than managers. Our process is flexible by definition because we can respond to any situation or project that needs attention since time is not a major factor. That is, we meet few deadlines, save those that require the completion of small projects or applications for grants. We depend on others to complete projects while we play a supporting role...

...which is a weakness, as well. Since we have few funds, we can initiate and complete only small projects, such as brochures and publicity. There will come a time when we will have



to step up and find funds to develop design projects for such sites as “Florence Point” or the “Hidden Mill River” in Northampton’s downtown. Furthermore, MRGI alone is a fragile organization, dependent on two co-moderators and members with little spare time.

In our first year, we lacked the consistency only an institution can supply. Smith College, via the Landscape Studies program and the Center for the Environment, Ecological Design, and Sustainability (CEEDS) has served as the institutional backbone for the MRGI. Smith College has been a resource, a memory, and a facilitator for projects related to the Mill River Greenway. Discrete projects, small and large, come and go. Smith College serves to ensure that these projects build on one another. When new groups, projects, or initiatives surface, Smith College can facilitate the alignment of these new projects with projects of the recent and more distant past. For Greenway visioning and planning to work, local groups with local knowledge must take the lead. MRGI has enlisted Smith College to work in the background help realize the broader vision. Greenways inevitably cross political boundaries and only hang together when all involved can see the benefits. Institutions such as colleges, universities, and regional planning agencies can help.

#### *d. A Final Few Words*

In broad outline, the Mill River Greenway Initiative has revived the original process that towns and entrepreneurs used in developing anchors and connections along the Mill River. Beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with the help of local government and private funds, millers and factory owners built enterprises on dam sites up and down the river, first connecting them with streets and roads, then with a railroad. Each anchor site reflected its owner’s and residents’ vision, while the connections were created with government aid. This is the same process we are following, and, while it will likely take many years to develop each site, it will be worth the wait.

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While most of the following are not mentioned specifically in the body of this essay, we drew inspiration from the following works:

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