



The Housatonic River is the natural Main Street of the Town of Great Barrington, flowing gently as the life stream of the town.



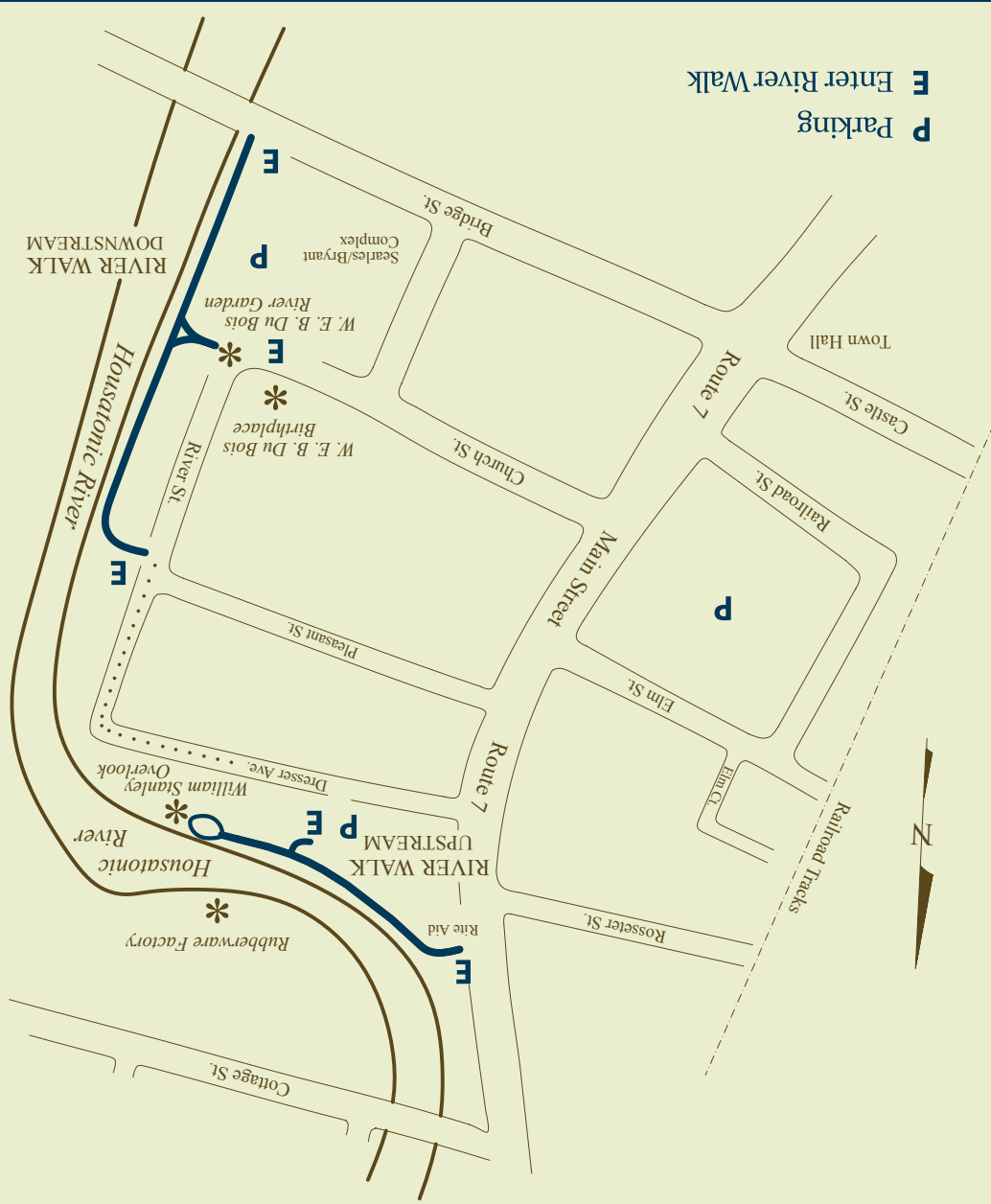
Welcome to River Walk, a greenway trail along the Housatonic River in the downtown center of Great Barrington, Massachusetts.

Please enjoy your visit.



Where does it Start?

River Walk roughly follows the west bank of the Housatonic River between Cottage Street and Bridge Street. The two completed sections of trail are linked by Dresser Avenue and River Street. The upstream section extends from the River Walk bulletin board at Rite Aid on Main Street to the William Stanley Overlook. The trail exits at the stairs to St. Peter's Church parking lot on Dresser Avenue. The downstream section of the trail is wheelchair accessible and begins adjacent to the Berkshire Corporation parking lot on River Street and ends at Bridge Street. It can also be entered through the W. E. B. Du Bois River Garden at Church and River Streets.



HOUSATONIC RIVER WALK GREAT BARRINGTON

HOUSATONIC RIVER WALK

CONTRIBUTIONS

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

In 2009, River Walk was designated as a National Recreation Trail, joining it to America's 12,000 mile National Trail System.

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

Donations are tax-deductible and may be sent to: Housatonic River Walk, PO Box 1018, Great Barrington, MA 01230

Or donate online: visit our website at www.gbriverwalk.org



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Great Barrington • Massachusetts



It's cherishing something local that everybody can have in common,

and to me a thing like that can't go wrong.

It's just a little narrow walkway, scaled right, but it's an enormously suggestive thing.

-WENDELL BERRY ABOUT THE RIVER WALK



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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TRAIL ETIQUETTE

- Please remember that you are passing through private property and are here as a guest.
- Please remember that it is unsafe to use the trail during icy conditions and therefore the trail is closed during the winter months.
- Please leash and curb your dog. Waste bags are provided on both trail sections. Our volunteers appreciate their use.
- Please remember that the path is constructed for walking and nature viewing only. No bicycles.
- Please use the proper entrances and exits. Stay on the delineated trail where it is safe to travel.
- Riverbank slopes are sensitive to erosion. Please do not climb on the bank.
- Please respect the desire of others for a smoke-free environment. Cigarette butts are not biodegradable.
- Please help us to keep River Walk clean. Carry out what you carried in.
- Please consider picking up any litter you may see along the trail.
- Please leave the flowers for all to enjoy.

Excerpt by Wendell Berry reprinted with permission from U.S. Catholic magazine, *Berkshire Courier*, 1961, to Ronald Linden, *Berkshire Courier*, 1961, reprinted with permission of the family of the late George P. Fitzpatrick. *Berkshire Courier*, 1960, to Ronald Linden, *Berkshire Courier*, 1961, reprinted with permission of the family of the late George P. Fitzpatrick. Excerpts by W. E. B. Du Bois, 1920, *Darwater*, 1930, "The Housatonic River Speaks".

HOUSATONIC RIVER WALK UPSTREAM



A | Volunteers

River Walk was created by community volunteers who live in and around Great Barrington. Since 1988, 2200 volunteers have worked on clean up, construction and maintenance of River Walk, removing 400 tons of debris, building the trail and planting thousands of native plants.

The work of River Walk began here 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.



B | 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, the building on the site currently housing Rite Aid, 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.



D | Trail Building

Building trails on steep and fragile riverbanks requires special skill and attention. Four techniques used at River Walk can be seen from the Secundy bench here. 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.

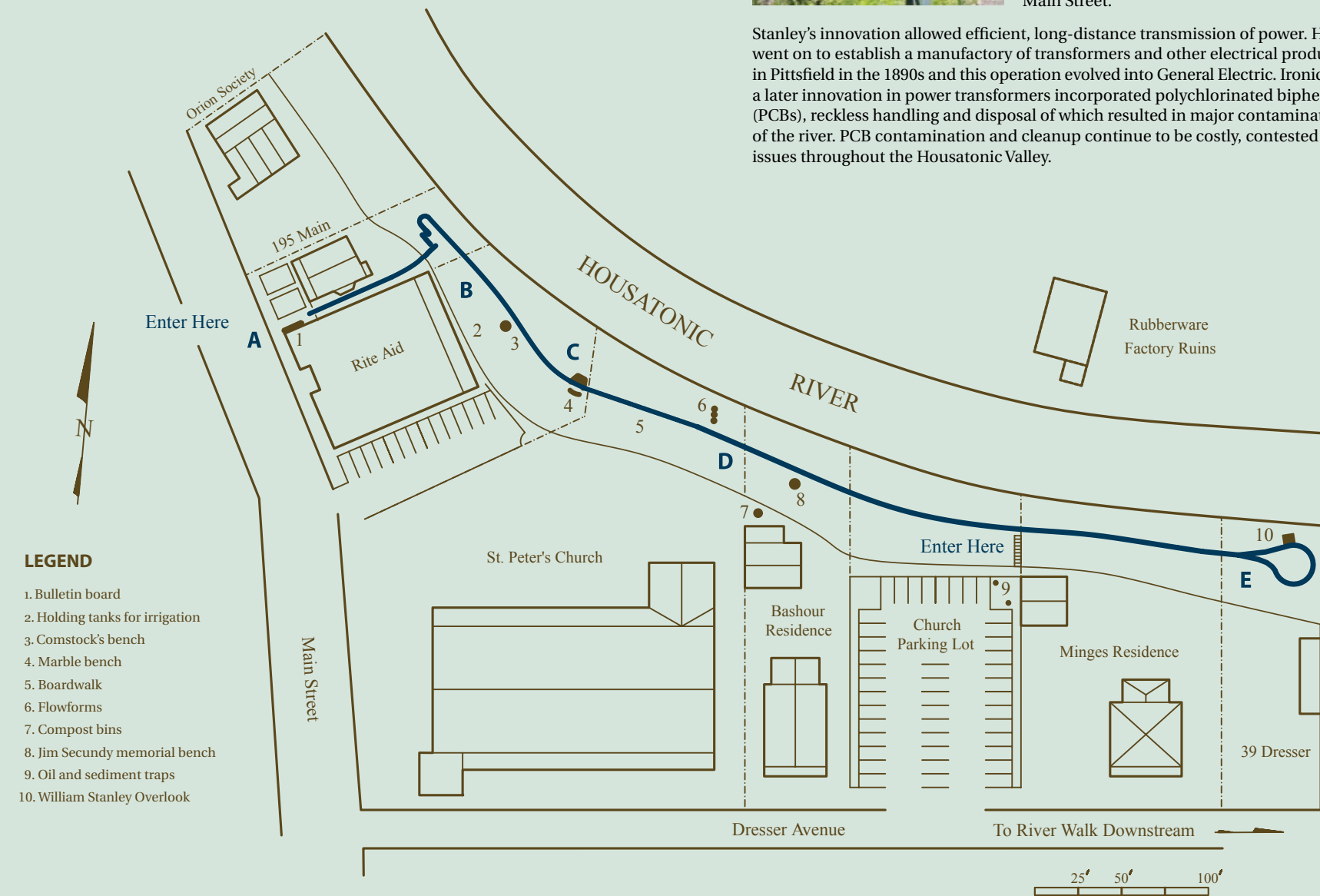
Volunteers and workers haul materials by hand to the steep site. By doing this work without heavy equipment, they leave the riverbank intact with minimal disturbance. The trail protects fragile riverbanks from erosion and prevents sedimentation in the river by keeping foot traffic off easily eroded soils. 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.



E | 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 just visible across the river from the Stanley Overlook. 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.



C | 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.

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

Below the Rite Aid building, 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.

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 here 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 also 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 the rooftop of Rite Aid Pharmacy is slowly dispersed through an infiltration trench at the top of the slope. Downstream, steep sections of riverbank composed of artificial fill are stabilized using techniques ranging from excavation and stone reinforcement to bio-engineering with native vegetation. At the Du Bois River Garden, 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.

HOUSATONIC RIVER WALK DOWNSTREAM



F | 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

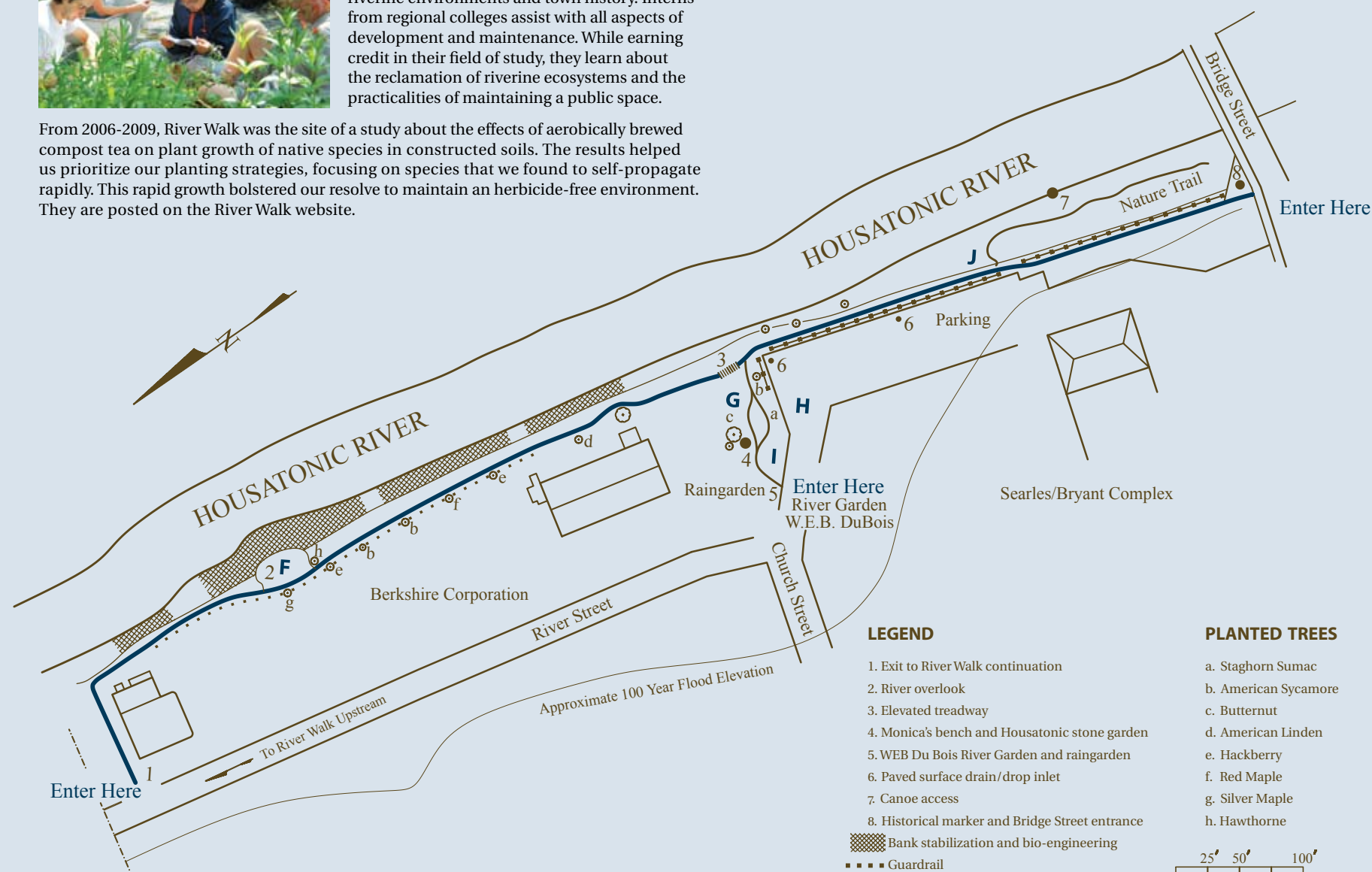
Creating a diverse native plant community is the keystone of our reclamation work. Layered plantings contribute to surface water quality by shading and cooling the river and by stabilizing the bank, preventing erosion and river siltation. Native plants cleanse and take up pollutants and, by replacing 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. Two hundred native species we have planted are identified on the River Walk website.



G | 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 was the site of a study about the effects of aerobically brewed compost tea on plant growth of native species in constructed soils. The results helped us prioritize our planting strategies, focusing on species that we found to self-propagate rapidly. This rapid growth bolstered our resolve to maintain an herbicide-free environment. They are posted on the River Walk website.



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



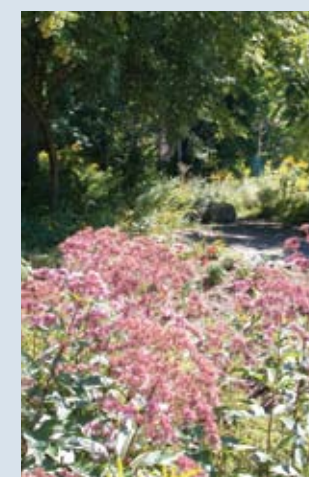
H | W. E. B. Du Bois River Garden

The Housatonic River plays a special role in our local and national history. This 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.

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 was 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 was regularly tested to assess the quality and quantity of its microorganisms, then applied to the soil to assist plant growth.



I | 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 nor 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.

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J | 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 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.