

A Natural History of the Leeds Memorial Conservation Area



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Leeds Monument Conservation Area

When this tiny conservation area was donated in 1999, its primary purpose was to host a stone memorial to the victims from Leeds who died in the 1874 Mill River Disaster, but by default, it also created a piece of dedicated open space in the heart of downtown Leeds and right along the river.



Today, with the exception of the small garden around the monument, this conservation area is a wild tangle. The trees and brush along Main Street are so thick that it is almost impossible to see the river for most of the year, there is no path to the river's edge, and most of the land along the river has been overwhelmed by a mass of invasive non-native plants.

That's the bad news.

The good news is that that's not the way it has to be. With the proper permits, the non-native plants could be controlled (which would help the native species recover) and a portion of the conservation area could be opened to allow easy access to the river's edge. These initiatives would not only improve the ecology of this tiny conservation area, but it would also make this property a more interesting place for neighbors, as well as people who will stop here as part of the soon-to-be-published self-guided historical walking tour of Leeds.

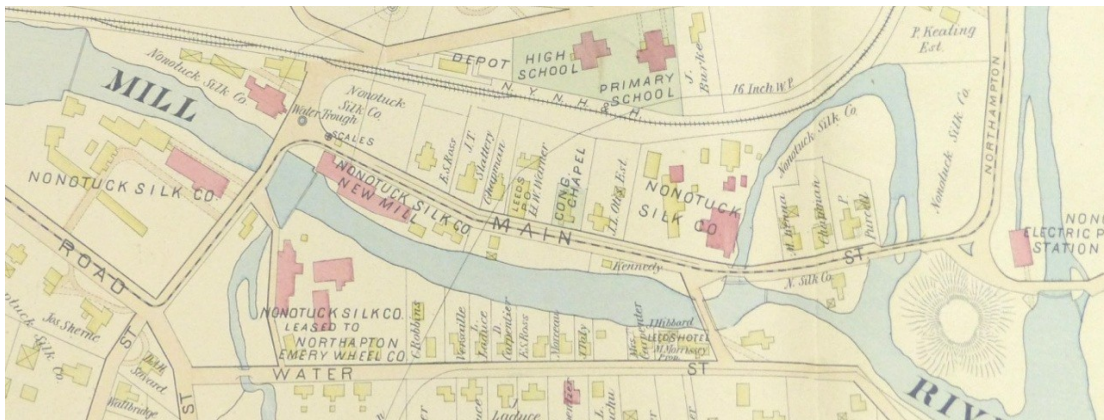
History & Ecology

This conservation area was created not with conservation in mind, but history. In the late 1990s, a small group of local historians



On May 16, 1999, 125 years after the disaster, a monument was erected in Leeds to honor the 51 people from the village who lost their lives during the flood. The plaque provides a short, eloquent and haunting description of how the "rampaging water" roared through Leeds in less than ten minutes, destroying homes, factories, and lives. It also lists the names, ages and family relationships of each of the victims, who ranged in age from just five months to 80 years old. The Fennessey family alone lost seven members of their family, the Fitzgerald family lost six.

decided to erect separate monuments in each of the villages where people died during the Mill River Disaster. Jim Parsons was the amateur historian who spearheaded the Leeds effort and, working in collaboration with the Leeds Civic Association, he asked his long-time acquaintance, Russ Myette, if he would donate a piece of his land for the project. Myette had grown up in the house just below the Hotel Bridge and in the early 1950s, he purchased the narrow strip along Main Street that runs upriver from the Hotel Bridge.



The 1895 map reveals what an important land owner the Nonotuck Silk Company was in downtown Leeds. The aqueduct from the reservoir (now Musante Beach) was installed in 1873. It is probably still under the river, but this pipe is no longer used.

Considering the purpose, Myette's land was an ideal location for a memorial to the flood victims. Not only was it right in the heart of the village, it had been scoured by the Mill River Flood, and furthermore, in 1874 this strip of land was owned by the Nonotuck Silk Company, one of the original investors in the failed dam of the Hampshire Reservoir.



These two aerial views of downtown Leeds along the Mill River (1965 and 2013) reveal how the vegetation along this stretch of the Mill River has grown over the years.

The land was also hardly pristine. The vegetation had been cleared repeatedly, and the portion closest to the road is made up entirely of old fill, which meant that a little more alteration along the road for a memorial wasn't likely to cause any environmental concerns.



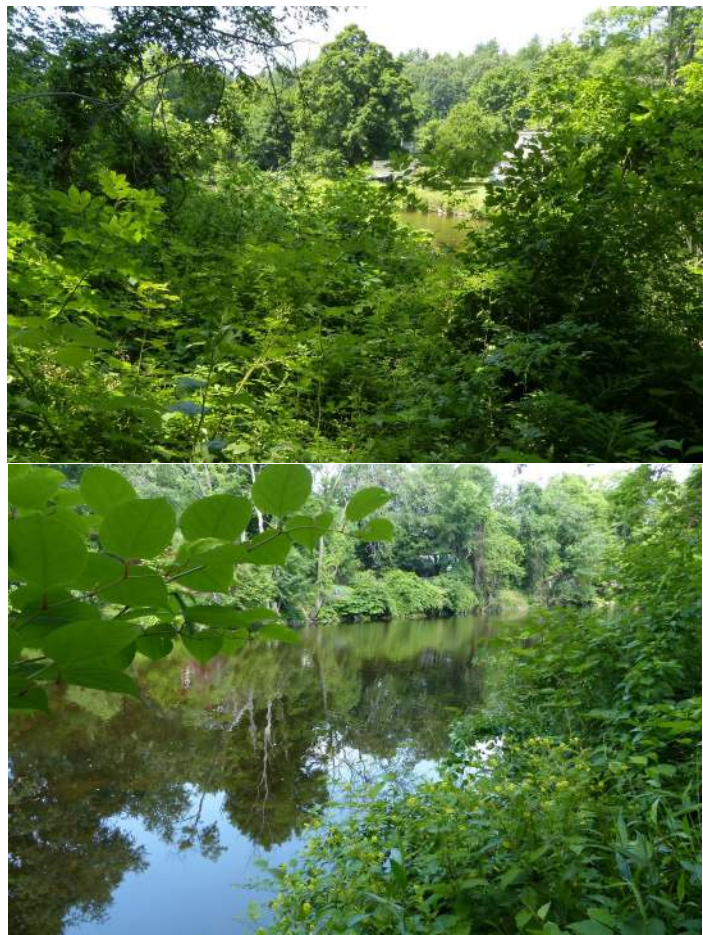
This image from 1890 shows no vegetation along the Mill River in the area where the conservation area is now. It was actually taken from the base of Roberts Hill.

Vegetation Patterns

Since the monument was dedicated in 1999, the Leeds Civic Association has maintained the landscaping around the monument, but has left the rest of the land unmanaged. The property now includes about three dozen trees (and yes, it's so small that you can actually count them). Only two of the trees are good-sized: a large red maple and an even bigger catalpa. The rest are smaller and appear to be about ~20-40 years old. Slippery elm is the most common species, but there are also a few black cherry, sugar maple and black walnut.

The understory is a mix of native and non-native plants, but it is dominated by invasive plants. These threaten to displace the natives and they include nearly all of Northampton's most problematic species: Japanese knotweed, Asiatic bittersweet, multiflora rose, Japanese barberry, garlic mustard, Morrow's honeysuckle,

Leeds Memorial Conservation Area



Top: At this time, the quantity of invasive plants makes it almost impossible to even see the river from the road side, let alone access it.. But if some of the non-natives were removed, the view (*bottom*) is what people could experience and enjoy.

winged euonymus. The native species include a greater variety, with some of the most common being staghorn sumac, alternate-leaved dogwood, witch hazel, blackberry, meadowsweet, grape, Virginia creeper, goldenrod, asters, fringed loosestrife, golden alexanders, touch-me-not, sensitive fern, and several different kinds of grasses and sedges.

Wildlife

In spite of its narrowness and compromised nature, this strip along the river is used by more wildlife than might be expected. In addition to the ubiquitous gray squirrel, there was also evidence of rabbits, raccoons, and beavers. In fact, during the last year beavers have taken down several trees



Japanese knotweed, multiflora rose, barberry and bittersweet are displacing the native species.



Fringed loosestrife, a native species, in bloom.

Slippery elm is the most common tree.

Common Birds at the Leeds Memorial Conservation Area

Common Merganser	Phoebe
Green heron	Red-eyed vireo
Belted kingfisher	Carolina Wren
Grackle	Robin
Cardinal	Song Sparrow
	English sparrow



Fresh beaver chewing of one of the landscaped plantings

and shrubs within the conservation area—including some of the landscape shrubs around the monument!

Management Recommendations

Although the main purpose of this site is as a tribute to the 1874 flood victims, it could become a much more welcoming piece of open space in downtown Leeds if the non-native plants were controlled and better access to the river was created. This plan would obviously require permission from the conservation commission, but in a

matter of hours, half a dozen volunteers and a licensed herbicide applicator could cut out and spot treat the non-native plant stumps. Although most of the property could be left in its “wild” state (i.e. not manicured), a small path could be created just downstream from the monument, which would provide easy-access to the river’s edge.



The view of the conservation area from the Hotel Bridge.

From there, for the first time in years, local residents and visitors would be able to see the stonework on the other side, look down to the Hotel Bridge, and watch wildlife.

This would be a good project on its own, but in concert with the new historical walking tour, the future trail linking the bike path with the Button Factory Conservation area and Main Street, and the renewed effort to restore the Hotel Bridge for bicyclists and pedestrians—it makes even more sense.



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