

A Natural History of the Historic Mill River Near Veteran's Field



Prepared by Laurie L. Sanders, M.S.
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This 1.3 acre property is contiguous to Veteran's Field and includes a remnant of the abandoned Mill River channel, plus a narrow band of higher ground along the margins of the old bed. Invasive species are present within the conservation area, but surprisingly, are not that common. The neighboring properties, however, are much more invaded. Privet, for instance, is especially widespread on the land to the south and Japanese knotweed forms an almost continuous ring around Veteran's Field and borders much of the bike trail.



In the mid-1940s, not long after the Mill River was diverted, much of its old bed and floodplain within Veteran's Field was filled in. The soil was from an underground heating project being done by Smith College and the city was delighted to receive the excess and fill in the old bed.

Exploring the Conservation Land

Although the bike path forms one boundary of this conservation area, the simplest way to reach it is actually to take a small foot-path on the edge of Veteran's Field (see Map). This informal trail brings you to a small rise, which is crowned with a beautiful stand of sugar maple and black locust and includes a small clearing. This area is on private land, but it obviously well-used





In 1884, this entire area was owned by the Parsons' family, descendants of Northampton's original English settlers in 1654.



This small property is contiguous with Veteran's Field and the bike trail, plus in the vicinity of several other protected properties. Its odd configuration comes from its history: part of this property was the winding road that was used to build the dike in 1939.

by locals. From this gathering spot, the conservation area is just a short walk through the woods to the northwest. Its boundary is unmarked, however, so it helps to have a map or aerial photograph to figure out exactly where you are.



Vegetation Patterns

This small, seldom visited conservation area can be divided into three major plant communities (see Vegetation Map), with the shifts from one community type to the next due principally to the hydrology and the habitats ranging from upland mixed hardwoods to deciduous swamp forest to open wetland.



Silver maple is common in the old Mill River bed.



This photo from the 1960s shows the construction road to the dike and most of this conservation area as fairly open.

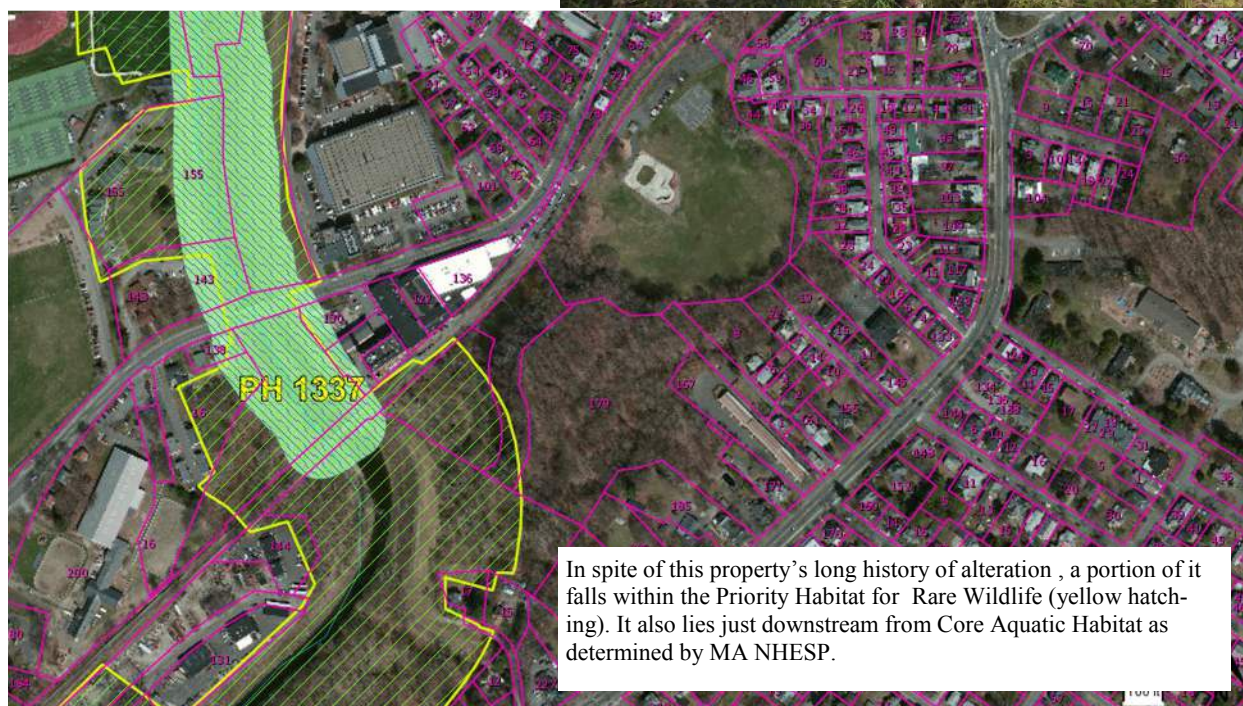
Uplands to Wetlands

The canopy in the drier areas of the conservation area is dominated by a mix of red maple, Norway maple, and black locust, but also includes slippery elm, and black cherry. This area also includes a single whopper tulip tree, with a 12-foot circumference!

Below the canopy, the shrub layer is fairly dense and includes an abundance of privet (non-native) and poison ivy (native). Virginia creeper, wild oats, goldenrod, celandine, lady fern and Canada mayflower are common in the drier sites, while the wetter soils have an even more diverse mix, including swaths of sensitive fern, spotted touch-me-not, jumpseed, beggar's ticks, as well as boneset, false solomon's seal, groundnut, wood nettle, and moneywort. Japanese knotweed is also occasionally found here, and Asiatic bittersweet is common. These wetter margins along the bed of the old Mill River bed also support a different mix of shrubs. Silky dogwood, winterberry, and especially northern arrowwood are common. There is also some wintercreeper and winged euonymus here too, and the canopy now includes both silver maple and cottonwood.

The final area is the remnant channel of the Mill River, which since its diversion in 1939, has developed into a semi-wooded, mostly open wetland complex. Red maple is especially common around the open wetland, but there are also scattered pin oak here and a few silver maples and cottonwoods. Ringing its margins is a narrow thicket of northern arrowwood and winterberry. A few buttonbush are growing in the most watery areas. Rice cut grass, royal fern and sensitive fern are also very common.

Heading “downstream” the old bed is more wooded and includes more silver maple and cottonwood in the canopy, while the bed itself is carpeted with



In spite of this property’s long history of alteration, a portion of it falls within the Priority Habitat for Rare Wildlife (yellow hatching). It also lies just downstream from Core Aquatic Habitat as determined by MA NHESP.

sensitive fern. This area holds enough water in the fall, winter and spring that it is used by ducks, great blue herons and other waterbirds.

Recommendations

This area could become a sweet pocket park, with a nice picnic spot and linking trails to the dike and/or South Street. It currently has some invasive species issues, but at least for now, it is the abutting properties that are more seriously invaded. That said, unless this area is monitored, this small pocket will



Clockwise: Much of Veteran's field is bordered with Japanese knotweed.

Catalpa, multiflora rose and Norway maple are three common non-native species found in the vicinity of the conservation area.

A low-spot on the former floodplain of the Mill River still holds water for longer enough periods that no vegetation is able to grow.

Two views of the Mill River from the dike, looking upstream to the bridge on West Street and downriver toward Grove Street. This part of the diversion took advantage of a portion of the long abandoned New Haven-Northampton Canal (1835-1847).



probably become much more invaded over time. The adjacent bike path, for instance, is already loaded with Japanese knotweed, Asiatic bittersweet and many other unwelcome invasive plants.

One challenge in developing this property via Veteran's Field will be safety. Right now, for whatever reason, it doesn't feel like a safe place when you're in the forest.

Perhaps a good alternative to developing this site more is to create a wildlife watching spot from the bike trail, which would provide a bird's eye view to the wetland area below, where turtles, ducks, frogs, and other kinds of wildlife can be observed.



Impressive bittersweet vines curl and twist around a cottonwood that lies just off the property.

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Photographs © Laurie Sanders.