



The Natural History of the Vistron Conservation Area



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Vistron Conservation Area



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Overview

Only half an acre in size, the rectangular-shaped Vistron Conservation Area has not changed much in the twenty years since the first inventory. Viewed from the roadside edge, it still looks rather uninviting—a mish-mash of trees, its wild growth framed by a parking lot and dumpsters. But portions of the interior of the property are quite nice and the view of the river especially so.



The scruffy edge of the conservation begins behind the dumpsters and parking area.

History

This conservation area is located along a stretch of the Mill River that has been a manufacturing focal point since the late 17th century. In 1681 the town granted permission for a sawmill just upriver from where the Nonotuck Dam now stands. This was Northampton's fourth sawmill, and during the next century, there were various owners. In 1810, the sawmill was converted into a linseed oil and grist mill, and then in 1835, it was sold again, this time to the newly established Northampton Silk Company.

During the next five years, the Northampton Silk Company purchased land, planted mulberry trees, and in 1837, the directors built a large, brick factory to house their equipment for reeling and weaving silk thread. A small part of this initial building program remains: the Braid Mill that abuts the conservation area was part of it.

Raising silkworms and producing profit-



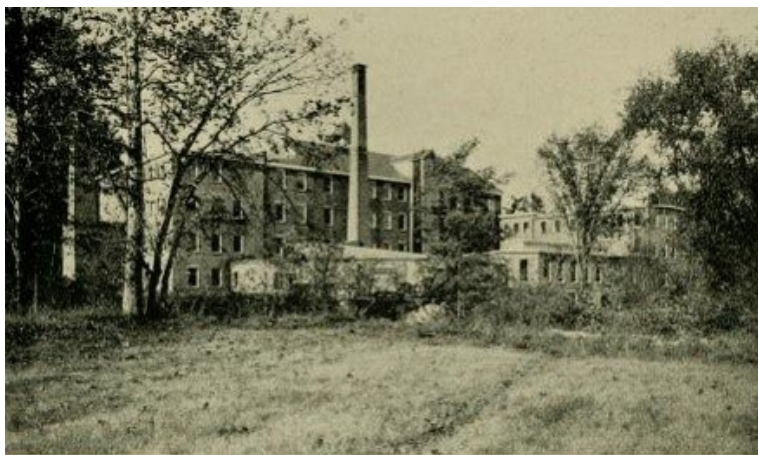
The Vistron property borders the river and is just a couple hundred feet away from Maine's Field (blue), which was donated to the City in 1922 by Florence resident and local philanthropist Julius Maine. The gift was made in honor of his brother.



NONOTUCK SILK COMPANY'S DAM.



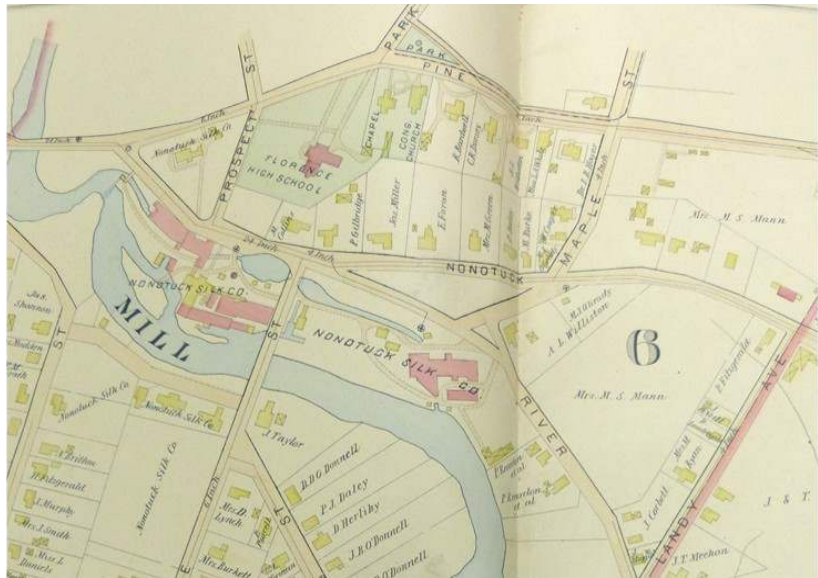
OLD SILK MILL BOARDING HOUSE. VIEW NEAR THE DAM. LILLY PLACE.



REAR VIEW OF BRAID MILL—ORIGINAL COMMUNITY BUILDING IS SHOWN IN CENTER.

Three images from Charles Sheffield's History of Florence, Massachusetts, published in 1894.

able silk was a difficult task, and the Northampton Silk Company became insolvent in 1840. A year later, the former company's extensive holdings were sold to the leaders of the Northampton Association of Education and Industry. Known as the Community and built on abolitionist and utopian principles, its members also tried their hand at producing silk. After five years, the Community also dissolved and the factory was sold to a handful of



This 1895 map shows a series of storage buildings associated with the Nonotuck Silk Mill on near the property.

its former members. This time, rather than raising their own silkworms, the new owners began importing raw silk and by the late 1800s, their silk thread became world-renowned. By 1895, the Nonotuck Silk Company owned most of the property in the vicinity, and the land that now constitutes the Vistron Conservation Area held storage buildings.

During the next few decades, the silk manufacturing operations changed names—from the Nonotuck Silk Mill to the Corticelli Silk Company, then to Belding to Belding Hemenway. By the 1920s, the company began to suffer economically. In 1930, in the wake of the depression, the manufacturer of silk thread on the property ended production after nearly a century of operations.

The buildings were subsequently purchased by Pro-Phyl-Lac-Tic (or Pro-Brush), a long time local manu-



In the 1950s, the property (shown here in yellow) was an open clearing.

facturer that produced different kinds of brushes (toothbrushes, hairbrushes, shaving brushes, etc.) as well as many other products made of plastic. In the early 1970s, Pro-Brush was acquired by the Vistron Corporation, which donated this small section to the City as conservation land in 1974.



Although this is a very tiny conservation area with a long history of alteration, it has been left more or less on its own since the 1950s. The black locusts have grown into good-sized canopy trees, and the view of the river in spring is wild enough that it makes it hard to reconcile that you're otherwise surrounded by homes and businesses.

Geology

The soils at this site have been altered over and over during the last 200 years, but originally they were clays, fines and sands deposited during the period of Glacial Lake Hitchcock (15,000-12,000 years ago.) These sediments were subsequently reworked by the Mill River.

Vegetation

By the time the land was donated in 1974, the former mill buildings were mostly gone and the vegetation had begun to grow back. Since then, it has been left virtually untouched and the major vegetation patterns that were observed in 1993 are still present today. The canopy, for instance, continues to be dominated by black locust, with a few sugar maples, slippery elm, and black walnut. Along the eastern property line, the single basswood and impressive sycamore that were growing twenty years



Various outbuildings associated with the nearby silk mills were constructed on the property during the 1800s. Today you can still find pieces of old broken junk, as well as the broken-down remains of stairs to the last building.

ago are still healthy and going strong. A lone black willow grows near the riverbank.

The understory is also similar in composition and appearance compared to twenty years ago, and remains a patchy mix of shrubs and small openings. The shrub layer includes several native species (silky dogwood, chokecherry, blackberry, and staghorn sumac) as well as an abundance of non-native species (Morrow's honeysuckle, privet, winged euonymus, and Japanese barberry). There is still a good-sized patch of multi-

flora rose and what was once a single, uninterrupted clump of Japanese knotweed is now two, with the original patch being even larger. Asiatic bittersweet has also increased in both abundance and size, with large vines now twisting up into the canopy and many smaller ones threatening to do the same. In addi-



Young shoots of Japanese knotweed, one of the most aggressively spreading non-native plants in the eastern United States.



tion to these old familiar invasive species, a “new” invasive has appeared as well. A member of the bitter-sweet and euonymus family, it is known as winter-creeper or spindle vine. It was brought to the United States intentionally and has escaped from the garden and spread into many of the forested settings, especially along the Mill River.

The herb layer also continues to be a mix of native and non-native, invasive plants, with natives making the greatest contribution to the site’s overall diversity. Among the most common are spotted touch-me-not, true solomon’s seal, violets, bedstraws, trout lily, avens, goldenrods, Virginia creeper, fringed loosestrife, jack-in-the-pulpit, enchanter’s nightshade, poi-



Wintercreeper wraps around a trunk near the river.



Clockwise, from the top. Japanese knotweed stalks in the spring; purple violets; a patch of Scilla; young poison ivy leaves.

son ivy, raspberry, asters, and river grape. Garlic mustard is extremely abundant and widespread on the property, and there are also broad patches near the neighboring houses of scilla and daylilies. In essence, the area remains a reservoir for non-native species, including nearly all of the most troublesome and worrisome species.

Wildlife

In terms of wildlife, the property's small size and urban setting limit its value to wildlife. The river, however, provides an important corridor and many common birds can be observed here (cardinals, chickadees, Carolina wrens, blue jays and titmice) and the area is undoubtedly visited by raccoons, skunks and opossums.

Management Recommendations

One of the biggest limitations for this property is that it remains land-locked with no public access or parking. That said, it still seems like a good idea to work with local residents and the owners of nearby businesses to remove the non-native plants and help to create a small “park” that would allow access to the river. Although the bank length is short (just 75 feet!), consists of mostly rock riprap, and has a city sewer and water line, it is actually pleasant and the shade from the locust trees makes a nice picnic spot or place to relax. A sign describing the history of this portion of the Mill River—particularly related to Northampton's silk industries-- could also be installed. In addition, if the owners of the Braid Mill agreed, the path from their parking lot could easily be made wheelchair accessible.



Animal scratch marks on a fallen trunk.



The idea of a semi-natural park is also more possible after the mostly-good news from a Phase 1 Site Assessment. Conducted in 2005, the study was commissioned by the City and was strictly based on historic records and a visual search of the property. Based on their findings, the authors did not recommend a complete Phase II assessment. They did, however, suggest the soils in the eastern portion of the property and near the stone foundation be analyzed to confirm that no hazardous residues remain in the soil.



A pipe from a neighboring property discharges at or near the boundary of the conservation area.



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Sources

Sheffield, Charles. 1895. *The History of Florence, Massachusetts*.

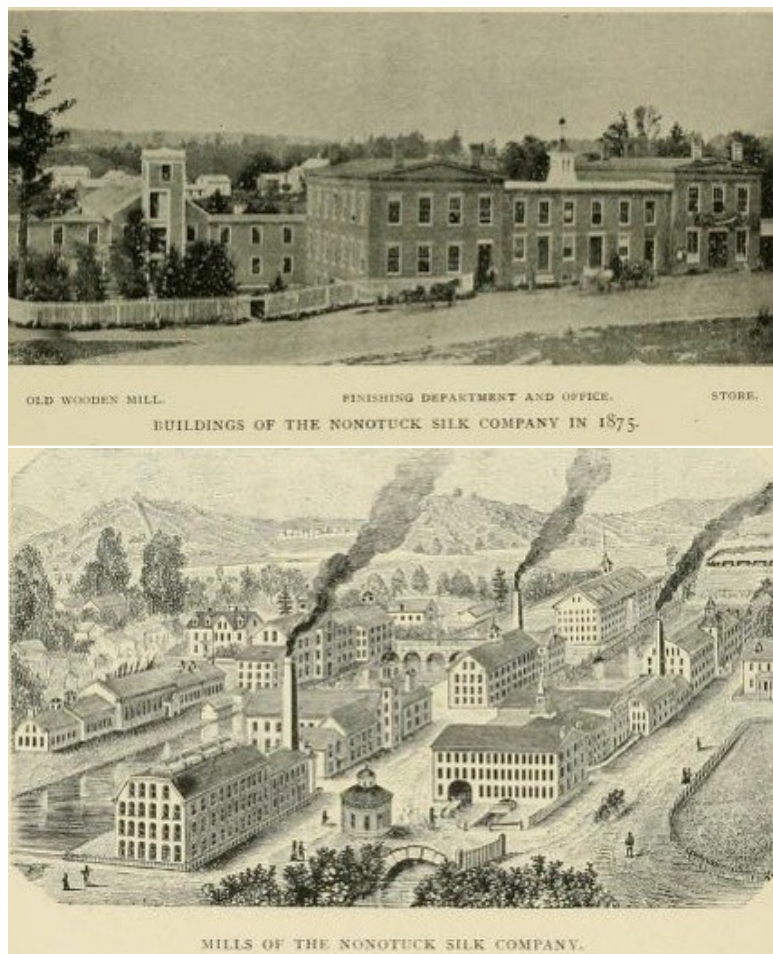
Tonry, Claire. 2005. Phase 1: Environmental Site Assessment, Vistron Section of the Mill River, Riverside Drive, Florence, MA. pp. 1-9.

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Unless otherwise noted, all photographs © Laurie Sanders.



Asiatic bittersweet vines twist into the canopy.



Images of the Nonotuck Silk Mill, in real life and an artist's rendition, loosely based on reality.
From Sheffield's History of Florence.