

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.

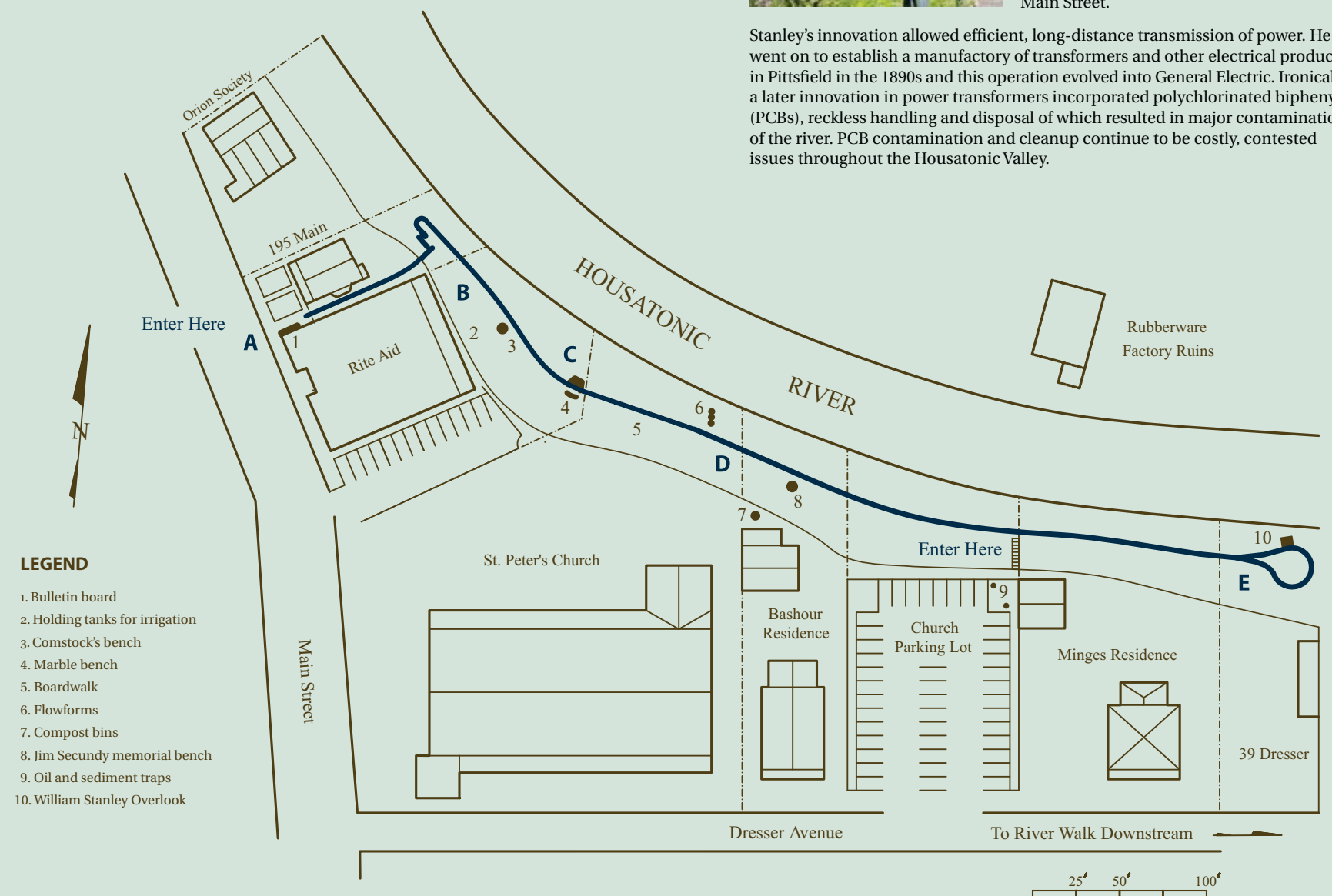
Volunteers and workers haul materials by hand to the steep site. By doing this work without heavy equipment, they leave the riverbank intact with minimal disturbance. The trail protects fragile riverbanks from erosion and prevents sedimentation in the river by keeping foot traffic off easily eroded soils.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