

Great Barrington history under foot



I didn't know a walk around town would link me to the Mississippi flood of 1927,

George Westinghouse and Thomas Edison's battle over electric current and a Major from King Phillip's War who captured Algonquian troops and sold the men as slaves.

It was a sunny morning, a real early summer day, and I had an hour between interviews, so I downloaded the app for the Great Barrington Historical Commission's walking tour.

It started me from the library (where I was standing on the steps waiting for it to download) and past St. Peter's Church, finished in 1911. Three thousand people, I read, came to the cornerstone ceremony.

It's hard to imagine a congregation 3,000 strong today in a country town. But those were the cotton mill days, and the Irish and Polish families working in the mills meant more Catholic souls in the county. In Bennington around that time the Catholic congregation had outgrown the church — the Bennington Museum has a painting of the overflowing congregants kneeling to pray in the churchyard in the snow.

Past the marble tower I came down the steps to the River Walk. In all my time as a journalist in the county, almost a dozen years, I had never yet walked it. The ferns overhanging the bank thickly here, and the path is smooth and carefully marked.

To the right maybe a quarter mile stands the William Stanley Overlook. I read about it as I stood there — the tour comes with audio, but I chose to read it and listen to the river. The foundations of the factory he used as a laboratory stand on the far side, stone walls fading into the river bank.

"On March 20, 1886, William Stanley powered lights along Main Street using alternating current transformers,"

the tour tells me. A plaque at the overlood adds that at the same time, Mary Sherwood Hopkins had an Edison direct-current system installed at her Berkshire Cottage. The two inventors were beginning a pitched battle over electricity. And how did it feel to stand in a Main Street shop and see electric light turn on overhead *when you had never seen it before?*

Looking at the crumbling foundations of William Stanley's workshop, I wonder what the inside of it looked like and what conversations and arguments carried on there.

This is why I like walking around town with snippets of history and leaning by the river reading about W.E.B. DuBois' involvement with the Niagara Movement, leading up to the forming of the NAACP. Moments in the past when something began or ended or changed become almost tangible. I want to step into it, and at each step I want another.

At the far end of the River Walk, on Bridge Street, a plaque marks the site of the "Great Wigwam" where a Major John Talcott "overtook and dispersed a party of Indians in August, 1676."

Wondering what the Great Wigwam may be, and who Major Talcott killed at the old ford under the Bridge Street Bridge, I've rediscovered the conflict that nearly drove Colonists back out of New England in the 1670s. My high school history book called it King Phillip's War, but that old history class never made real what that meant.

And it never showed me the man who led it. His name was Metacomet. He was the son of Massasoit, the commander who negotiated with the Plymouth Bay Colony and kept it alive.

Metacomet had seen a kind of destruction of people and ways of life I can't begin to imagine — he had survived a pandemic — and with all the odds against him he seems to have united a coalition of nations into a powerful force. As a leader, as a speaker, a negotiator, a strategist and a general, he must have had great skill.

I've looked up more about him, trying to walk the land he knew.

In August 1676, he had just been killed by an American Indian soldier in the Colonial army. If he had won I would not be writing this here now. But I look at that plaque and think of the Narragansett men who fought alongside him and the people who felt his loss when he died.

This post first ran as a By the Way column in Berkshires Week in May 2014, in my time as editor there.

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