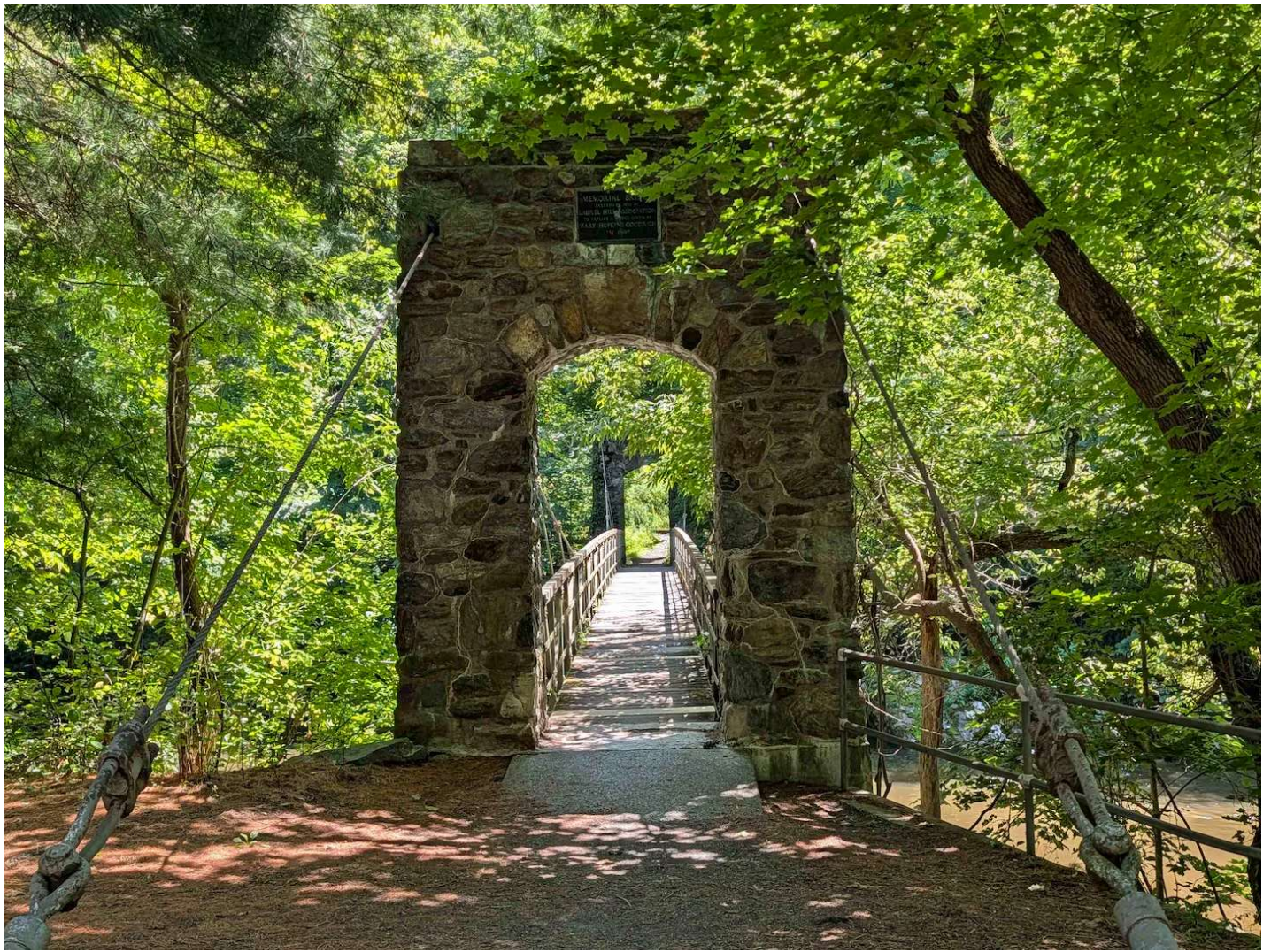


TRAVEL

Five walks along the Housatonic River that will have you banking on the Berkshires

The trails reveal a river's history

By **Patricia Harris and David Lyon** Globe Correspondent, Updated September 26, 2026, 5:30 a.m.



This marvelous arch and bridge across the Housatonic River is the access point to three Stockbridge hiking trails. DAVID LYON

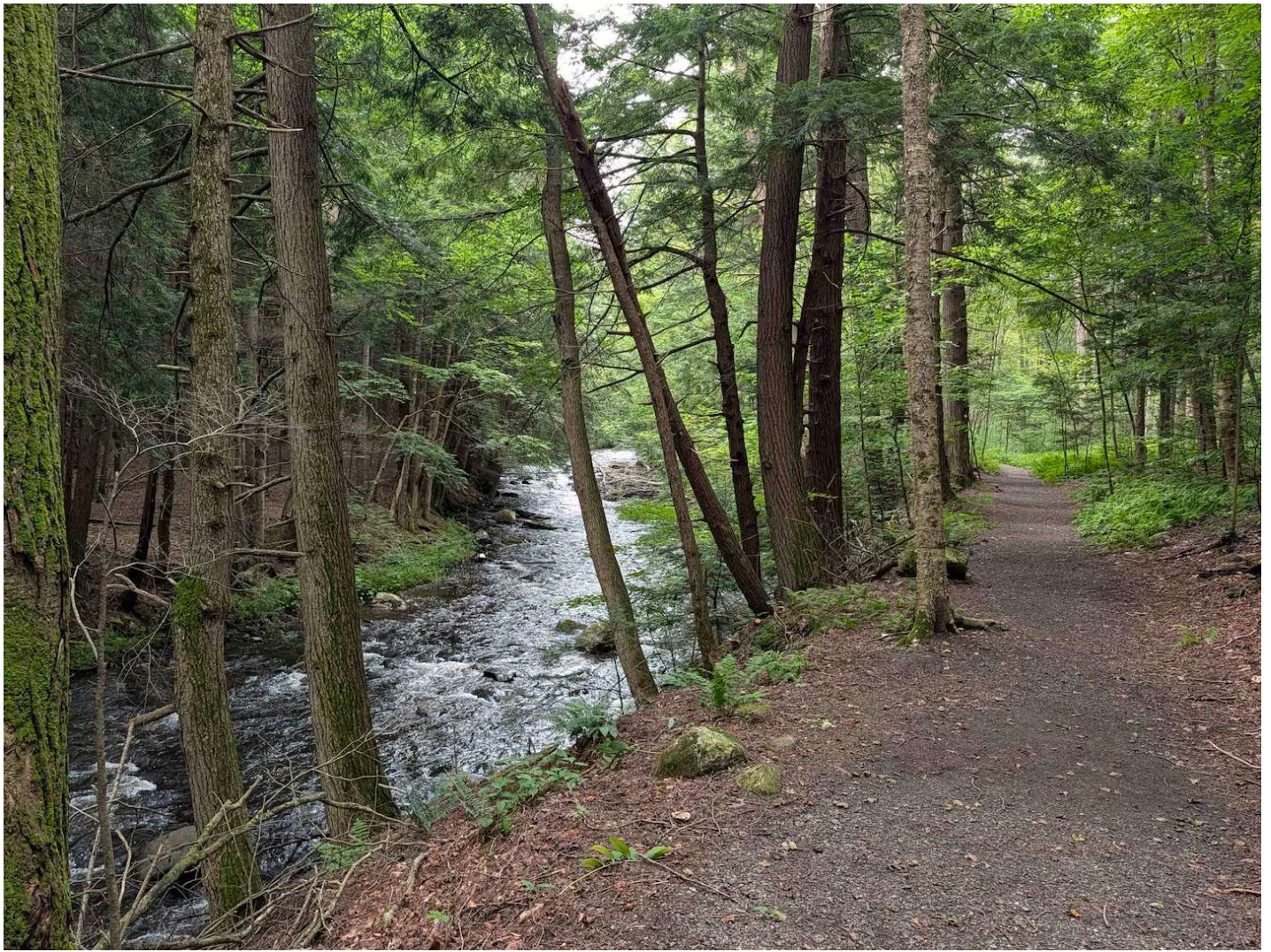
The Housatonic may not be the biggest or even the most storied river in Massachusetts. But it is our Goldilocks river — big enough to impress yet contained enough to be approachable. Moreover, it's well-loved by many conservation groups that have created some of the nicest river access walking trails in the state. Each of these five trails sheds a little different light on the history, ecology, and aesthetic appeal of the river that defines the southern Berkshires.



It's hard to miss the colorful trail markers on the Old Mill Trail. DAVID LYON

Old Mill Trail, Hinsdale to Dalton

The main stem of the Housatonic begins in Pittsfield, where the west, east, and southeast branches converge. The Old Mill Trail follows the clean and pure water of the Housatonic River East Branch. The 1.5-mile trail is wheelchair accessible for roughly the first half. Even if you turn back before the relatively flat packed-earth path turns uphill and rocky, you'll experience the essence of this walk. The river gains force in the initial stretch, growing as streams and springs trickle in. The high canopy of surrounding trees permits good views of the water and surrounding landscape.



The Old Mill Trail in Hinsdale follows the narrow Housatonic River East Branch, DAVID LYON

Three solid bridges cross the river or its tributary streams before reaching the site of Plunkett Brothers Mill, the first hint of the river's industrial past. Constructed as a

woolen mill in 1851, most of its mighty forms are receding into the encroaching forest. The mill site appears on the right immediately after you pass the rusted carcass of a 1938 Oldsmobile on the left hillside between the trail and Route 8. It's a marvelously elegiac scene as mosses and shrubs slowly obliterate the human history.

Crane & Company, the owner of the land along this section of the river, joined forces with conservation groups to create the walking trail that concludes in Dalton. Zenas Crane founded his company in Dalton in 1801 to take advantage of the cleanliness and mineral content of the East Branch.

Trailhead: Junction Route 8 and Old Dalton Road, Hinsdale. For map and interpretive guide, see the Berkshire Natural Resources Council (bnrc.org).



The Sacred Way Trail at Canoe Meadows Wildlife Sanctuary begins as a broad mowed swath through meadows around a small pond. DAVID LYON

Sacred Way Trail, Canoe Meadows Wildlife Sanctuary, Pittsfield

Mass Audubon's Canoe Meadows Wildlife Sanctuary got its name because the Indigenous people of the area used to beach their canoes on these swampy meadows along the banks of the Housatonic River. The 1-mile Sacred Way Trail begins as a broad mowed swath at the edge of the marshes. The path crosses a small bridge that provides a viewpoint over a shallow pond surrounded by tall grasses. When the path enters the woods, the footing changes to packed earth and tangled roots. Although the wooded path follows the banks of the Housatonic, the river often remains at a tantalizing remove, more glimpsed as light flashing off moving water than fully seen.



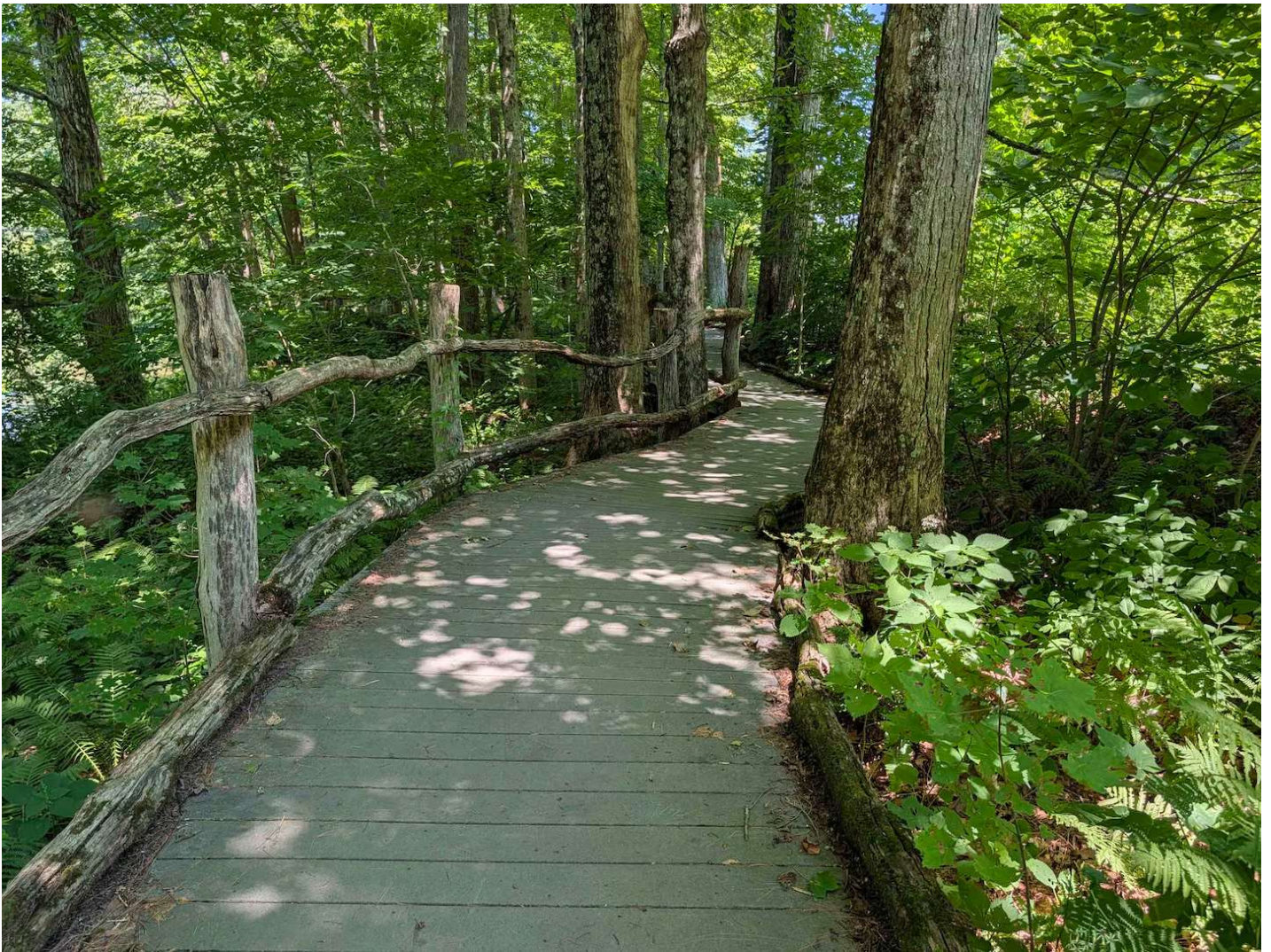
Bench along the Sacred Way Trail offers a place to rest and watch for beavers in the river oxbow. DAVID LYON



Eastern cottontail rabbit was the most visible wildlife along the Sacred Way Trail. DAVID LYON

As the trail begins to circle back, it does follow flooded banks where tree snags caught in the slow flow have piled up — possibly with the assistance of the sanctuary’s resident beavers. This trail captures the river at its most indolent, slowed and almost turgid. Birdsong was our constant companion, a reminder that the sanctuary is known for a variety of wildlife. We confess, though, that we only flushed a couple of rabbits and startled a blue heron into flight. As we circled back to the pond, we were met by a chorus of frogs twanging like plucked banjo strings.

Trailhead: 309 Holmes Road, Pittsfield. Download trail map at massaudubon.org.



The Mary V. Flynn Trail in Stockbridge begins as a brief boardwalk. DAVID LYON

Mary V. Flynn Trail, Stockbridge

The Laurel Hill Association, founded in 1853, claims to be the oldest village improvement association in the country. In a flurry of activity to celebrate its 150th anniversary in 2003, the group created three walking trails that share a trailhead. The easiest of the bunch is the Mary V. Flynn Trail, which is technically wheelchair accessible. We say “technically” because mishaps do occur, like deadfall trees blocking the way or post-storm erosion carving out a hollow beneath the end of a boardwalk. Once the access trail crosses a footbridge over the Housatonic, the Mary V. Flynn Trail heads to the left on a 100-foot boardwalk.



Bench on the Mary V. Flynn Trail is a good place to pause before walking the narrower loop. DAVID LYON

Most of the 1.2-mile roundtrip trail follows the railbed of the Berkshire Street Railway trolley line, which began operating in 1902. A wide, packed gravel path tunnels through a well-trimmed forest of birch, pine, and cottonwood. The overhanging branches make it a cool place to stroll on a hot day. Partway along the trail, a bench marks the juncture of the outbound trail and its return loop. Stay right until the trail meets the river near a

railed section. It then turns back on a narrower high riverbank dirt path that gives a clear view of the river — now wider and swifter than it was upriver in Hinsdale or Pittsfield.

Trailhead: End of Park Street, Stockbridge. Download map at laurelhillassociation.org.



Less than a half mile north of Great Barrington's Price Chopper, the Housatonic Flats has a loop trail of about 1 mile through a floodplain forest. DAVID LYON

Housatonic Flats Trail, Great Barrington

Another easy trail with gentle grades and smooth footing, this roughly 1-mile loop through a silver maple floodplain forest spends more time in the woods, marshes, and meadows than along the riverbank. As the former farmland reverts to pre-settlement conditions, it has become a key butterfly and migratory bird stop.



The often narrow path of the Housatonic Flats Trail is popular with runners. DAVID LYON

While it's unlikely that you'll spot the otter, beaver, or deer that inhabit this 26-acre site, they do leave telltale evidence — tracks and scat in the case of deer, bank burrows for the beaver, and two or three otter slides where those big members of the weasel family glide into the water. Housatonic Flats is open to fishing as well as hunting. Be sure to wear bright colors in the fall. The trail also permits leashed or well-controlled dogs, which may cut down on the wildlife spotting.

Trailhead: From Great Barrington Price Chopper, head north on Route 7 for less than a half mile. Trailhead parking is on the left. Download trail map at bnrc.org.



The downstream portion of the River Walk is flat, wide, and accessible by wheelchair. DAVID LYON

River Walk, Great Barrington

The two quarter-mile segments of this trail represent a labor of love. More than 2,700 volunteers have removed more than 400 tons of debris from the riverbank while planting trees, building trails, installing benches, and erecting signage. The resulting River Walk is a community treasure.

Although the trail segments are short, there's a lot to see. The upriver portion is reached by staircases on each end. The crushed gravel trail with solid safety fencing sits at the edge of the riverbank high above the rushing water. Most of the trail lies in a shady bower. Signage recounts some of the town history. For example, an overlook marks the site of William Stanley's transformer factory, where the inventor made long-distance power transmission possible.

The downstream trail is wheelchair accessible, gentler, and somehow tamer. Signage here evokes Great Barrington native W.E.B. Du Bois. A champion of the Housatonic, he called for cleaning up industrial pollution and restoring the river's "ancient beauty, making it the center of a town, of a valley, and perhaps ... a new measure of civilized life."



The upstream portion of the River Walk follows a path at the edge of the high riverbank. DAVID LYON

Over time, volunteers have weeded out the invasive exotic plants along the walk, replacing them with native species. The stone marker at the Bridge Street terminus predates the River Walk. It marks the site where a colonial militia routed a band of fleeing Narragansett warriors during King Philip's War. Time and natural erosion have rendered the inscription illegible.

Trailheads: Upstream at 195 Main St. and St. Peter's Church parking lot on Dresser Avenue. Downstream at Berkshire Corporation parking lot on River Street and at Bridge Street. Download brochure and map at gbriverwalk.org.

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