



New Hope for Urban Waterways

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A 10-FOOT ALUMINUM BOAT SLIDES OUT OF ITS dock at the Narragansett Boat Club and onto the Seekonk River. Nestled in the rocks below the surface is a large population of mussels and oysters. The December skies hold a mixture of sun and clouds, and the air is brisk with a light wind. It's the first time this season that the temperatures have really felt like winter, so a trip on the water seems like a dubious choice.

Along the shore are vacant lots, the skeletal remains of another era. In decades past, these lots were home to businesses such as Washburn Wire, a huge manufacturing plant, born in an age when electricity was new and buildings across America needed wire to deliver it. The demand was so strong that Washburn had plants in New York and Rhode Island, rolling out

steel, copper, and brass to suit the needs of a growing country. The Rhode Island factory sat on the banks of the Seekonk, which allowed the plant to easily deposit vast amounts of chemicals used in wire manufacturing into the river and out of sight. Seen from today's boat ride, all that remains of Washburn is a twin set of out-flow pipes, each roughly two feet in diameter, peering out from the wharf like the coal-black eyes of a ghost.

Contemplated over the past 150 years or so, Rhode Island's urban waterways have a complex history. These are waters that have endured the muscle flexing that was the Industrial Revolution, when the focus was on building Rhode Island, and the ability of the water to rejuvenate itself seemed infinite. Here, first the wealthy, and later the common people, played in the water and feasted on the bounty of the shellfish that were there for the taking. These are the waters that seemed left to ruin, as urban development brought with it both sewage and pollution from manufacturing

East Providence's industrial waterfront is seeing new life—and new development.



that made the thought of playing in or feasting on the waters not only unsafe, but suicidal. And these are the waters that have slowly come back, with the help of technology and the efforts of government and private agencies and local neighborhood associations.

Cholera and contamination

Providence's water problems date back to at least the 18th century, when homeowners near the river used it to deposit household wastes in the mistaken belief that the water would simply carry them away without impact. A story from the Narragansett Bay Commission's website reports that the superintendent of health for the city, in the midst of dealing with the second outbreak of cholera in five years, described the river as "filthy as any common sewer, and the stench arising from it at times pervades the whole neighborhood ... At any time, dogs, cats, and hogs may be seen in the water in every stage of decomposition."

In addition to the sewage, the Providence shoreline became home to manufacturing plants, steel mills, and oil refineries, adding vast amounts of chemical pollutants to the already-toxic mix. The trend would continue throughout America's wars, as the plants supplied materials and gasoline to the efforts. Sewage treatment plants, when they were finally built, were woefully inadequate to handle the amount of materials being dumped into the Providence River and its tributaries.

From summer camps to tank farms

If Providence waters catered to shipping and factories in the mid-19th century, much of coastal East Providence was home to the wealthy. Famous hotels with romantic-sounding names like *Vue de l'Eau* and *Silver Spring* beckoned captains of industry with deluxe accommodations and fresh seafood. As years passed, business owners recognized the market for catering to members of the middle class, and shore dining halls sprang up in the area. These were cavernous buildings, designed to accommodate the ever-increasing numbers of visitors to the waterfront who sought temporary respite from the oppressive heat of the cities.

Those visitors, in turn, realized that life along a pristine shoreline could become a reality, as real estate developers began to design neighborhoods like *Riverside*, *Pleasant Bluff*, *Camp White*, and others. The latter two began as spartan summer camps. Gradually, the camps were replaced with permanent structures: tiny cottages at first, and then sturdier buildings. The more bucolic names faded away, and the entire area became known as *Riverside*.

An inside view of the former Washburn Wire building, which has been torn down to make way for new development.







**A view of the furnace at Washburn Wire,
a relic of East Providence's industrial history**

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, waterfront amusement parks sprang up. The most well known of these was Crescent Park, which featured a shore dining hall and a swimming beach. Though the park lasted well into the 1960s, imitators such as Vanity Fair did not. The rise and fall of Vanity Fair is noteworthy not so much for its brief existence in the early 1900s as for the company, Standard Oil, that would buy the failed property and build a refinery on the land. Gradually, the shores of East Providence began to resemble those of Providence: an industrial landscape dotted with massive oil tanks, where water was a tool to transport goods as well as a convenient dumping place for sewage and the chemical byproducts of manufacturing plants and oil refineries.

Recovery and restoration

The struggles of dealing with pollutants in and around Rhode Island's urban waterways continued throughout the 20th century. Shoreline businesses came and went, and laws governing wastewater treatment strengthened. Rhode Island ratepayers poured millions into sewage treatment. The numbers of oil tanks gradually dwindled. As properties were either sold off or abandoned, the state recognized the need to adjust the laws around brownfield cleanup so that developers could bring new, cleaner businesses and housing to the area.

"Knowing that water quality has improved significantly all the way up and down the shoreline has made the area more attractive," said Jeanne Boyle, East Providence's city planner. "Getting rid of the tank farms will impact the regions farther south, as well."

She points out that residents of neighborhoods like Riverside have expressed strong interest in renewing

the coastal region. “There’s still a very strong connection in East Providence and Riverside, in particular, to identify with the coastline. That’s why so many people are interested in cleaning up those areas. We’ve put \$53 million into wastewater treatment.”

Places like Sabin Point Beach, once part of the East Providence recreational landscape, are the subject of restoration efforts. “We’ve been doing a lot of stormwater management planning with Save The Bay. The water quality has improved greatly all around Riverside. The Department of Health has found that water quality at Sabin Point and Crescent Beach meets the standard for swimming on a regular basis. Periods of high rainfall still prohibit swimming, but we’re looking into what we can do to get those closed days to become fewer and fewer.”

Wenley Ferguson, Save The Bay’s director of habitat restoration, is excited about Sabin Point’s possibilities. “We’ve found that during dry spells, areas around

Sabin Point can actually support swimming. However, there is a storm drain that emerges right in the middle of the beach, which makes the area a challenge. I brought this to the city’s attention three years ago, and we’re currently applying for monies to design ways to deal with that.”

“We’ve applied to DEM [the Department of Environmental Management] and obtained a grant to have a consulting firm do a stormwater management plan at Sabin Point,” said Boyle. “We’ve also identified a small portion of the parking lot to become a water runoff area. There are also paper streets (land that has been platted but not improved) that may help us. We need to come up with a number of solutions and find the most cost-effective ones to reduce the amount of nutrient loading at the beach.”

As the state and cities worked to improve water quality, the decision was made to survey urban waters with an eye to revising their classification as part of a plan to protect and preserve the improvements. The R.I. Coastal Resources Management Council’s coastal policy analyst, Jim Boyd, explains the state’s water-

Water quality at Sabin Point has improved dramatically in recent years. Photograph by Seth Fandetti





type classification approach. “Coastal waters are rated as Type 1 through 6; 1 is pristine conservation area, and 6 is the most problematic. Most of Narragansett Bay is Type 4, which are multipurpose waters,” he says.

“When we looked at the Providence River, there was a segment of the shoreline north of the Henderson Bridge to the Pawtucket line that was pretty well undisturbed. In most places, there’s a relatively steep bank, which included places like the Butler Hospital and Swan Point grounds. When you’re on the Seekonk River and paddling down towards the Providence, you don’t see much development, at least when there are leaves on the trees. For us, it made sense to protect that shoreline from future development, since Butler and Swan Point had already developed as much as they could, and the city of Providence owned some as open space. We thought it was fitting to reclassify those areas as Type 1, which happened in 2010.”

These efforts have been complemented by those of neighborhood groups. Jane Peterson, president of the Blackstone Parks Conservancy in Providence, says her organization has been working steadily to improve public access and restore native plants to the trails near the Seekonk River. “Our blessing and curse is that we’re a city park as well as a conservation area. The native plants that we’re using grow best in a wooded area, which makes growing them along our trails a challenge.” The conservancy has worked with both the DEM and the CRMC on improvements to trails and drainage for the area. A short time ago, they received a grant from the CRMC to repair a steep trail that ran from the top of a ridge and had been badly eroded. The grant money was used to create a terraced walkway, with native plantings on either side, that would hold the trail in place, while reducing stormwater runoff from the street.

The conservancy also works with schools to create conservation awareness. “We had kids from Moses Brown adopt our park. They’ve come down to look at York Pond and analyze the water conditions there. They’ve also designed stickers to go on storm drains, as well as created brochures to build public awareness,” Peterson says.

“You row on THAT water?”

Back at the Narragansett Boat Club, President Albin Moser reminisces about the decades he has spent on the water. As a rower, he has had ongoing, direct contact with some of the most toxic waters in the state. “Back in the 1960s, there was an incredible number of overflows from the sewage treatment plant,” he says, “People used to say, ‘You row on THAT water?’”

Albin Moser has seen wildlife re-emerge in the Seekonk River in the decades since it was one of the most toxic rivers in the state.

WE HAVE EAGLES AND OSPREYS, DUCKS AND HERONS, EVERYTHING

Moser recalls the multicolored water that used to spew from the drain pipes at Washburn Wire. “When I first started rowing, I mistakenly rowed near an out-flow and got caught against a piling. There was no way to get loose from this other than to let go and tumble into the water. It was shallow, and I was covered in muck. I thought for sure that my skin would fall off, but nothing ever happened.”

Wildlife in the area during the 1970s was almost nonexistent, but the decades since have produced remarkable changes in the Seekonk. The barren waters where factories ruled and ruined the waterways have been restored to a level of purity not seen in a century or more.

From the boat that motors through the afternoon chill, a decrepit railroad bridge that once transported equipment back and forth is now the site of the Omega Pond Fish Ladder, which saw its first influx of migrating herring this past spring.

Further upriver, the banks along Swan Point Cemetery have been frequented by bald eagles, with as many as nine at a time being seen in this region that was nearly devoid of life for well over a century. Today, the waters are classified as Type 1 conservation waters, and eagle sightings have become so common that they barely cause a ripple in the birding world.

The comments Moser makes about the club’s use of the Seekonk are in many ways a reflection of the ongoing improvements to the urban waterways.

“Here, you can get out on the water, and even if you’re in a sculling class, you’ve probably got 20 or 30 strokes between you and the next rower. For our beginners, they go from the bridge here to where Washburn Wire used to be, and that’s a pretty large expanse of water. You really have an opportunity to go in nice quiet open water and enjoy the sun, enjoy the air, look at the birds. We have eagles and ospreys, ducks and herons, everything. We have schools of fish, so many that they sometimes jump into people’s boats. It’s really incredible, and there’s no way that we had this in the ’60s, ’70s, or ’80s. It’s really been a great development.”