

The Mysterious Group and the Helen Heyn Riverway

Editors Note: *In June, I received the following message from a Newton resident:*

I was doing some research on the Conservators web site, into the Helen Heyn Riverway, when I found a reference to something called the Newton Knights of Tumsion. I'm very curious about this mysterious sounding group. Can you enlighten me?

I had no idea about the group, and a Google search was of no help, but in answer to my e-mail query to the board, Mike Clarke answered with the explanation below. I thought it should be shared with all our members.

I was wondering when somebody might ask. Sometime in the early 1990s, I acquired a copy of the Conservation Commission's 1975 plan for the Charles River (CR) pathway through Newton. Since I had been maintaining a mountain trail in New Hampshire, the meandering path on flat ground near the Charles looked like an easy trail construction. I talked with Martha Horn, then Newton's Environmental Planner, about it, and in 1995 I applied to the Conservation Commission for a construction permit and corresponded with the MDC (now DCR) to clear the section of the CR pathway from Nahanton St. to the Oak Hill trails behind Solomon Schechter School on Wells Ave.

Although I could do much of it alone, there were densely brushed sections, mainly of high bush blueberries with branches six feet high that often curved back and re-rooted in the ground and that were covered with greenbrier, which were tough, annoying and prickly painful to cut through. Therefore, I needed help, and at different times recruited a group of Conservators, including Bill and Dotty Hagar, and the Newton Knights of Tumsion (the correct spelling is with an "m" and not an "n"), who are a shady passel of characters, who prefer to remain anonymous, with whom I have canoed for over thirty years. It took several months, but the path got done with two entrances each opposite the two parking areas in Nahanton Park off Nahanton St.

Although I would periodically maintain the trail, several years later a group of Newton Serves volunteers, including me but organized by George and Deborah Perry, made the path better with additional clearing and widening. Years later in 2005, at the suggestion of Martha Horn, I drafted a letter (which then President of the Conservators Eric Reenstierna adapted) to propose naming that area along the river as the "Helen Heyn Riverland Conservation Area." It became the Helen Heyn Riverway Conservation Area.

As many Conservators remember, Helen Heyn was a founding member of the Newton Conservators in 1961 as well as of the Newton Conservation Commission in 1966.

She also served as secretary of the Charles River Watershed Association when it was founded in 1965. In 1967, Mayor Basbas appointed her to the Conservation Commission, on which she served as secretary until 1979. On Helen's watch, the city took title to many critical conservation areas, including Houghton Garden, Baldpate Meadow, Frank Barney Pond, Dolan Pond, Flowed Meadow, Goddard-Christina, Kennard, Martin, Charles River Pathway at William Street, Charles Cohen, Oakdale Woods, Saw Mill Brook, Varick Hill, Hunnewell Woods, Norumbega Park and Wilson Conservation Areas. Helen died at 89 in 2009, and I've often thought there should be a kiosk memorial to her at one of the entrances to the Riverway.



PHOTO: DAN BRODY

Helen Heyn Riverway

The Riverway is accessible from both the Nahanton Park parking lots on Nahanton St. In 2012, Boy Scout Troop 355, led by Eagle Scout Noah Carlen, resurrected the entrance path opposite the upper parking lot by paving it with wood chips and adding a log bench.

The Riverway is a beautiful walk and is used particularly by inhabitants of the Wells Avenue office park for lunchtime strolls.

Unfortunately, it's necessary to connect its various segments by walking out to Wells Avenue to bypass a stream or a marsh. It especially needs a footbridge over College Brook to make it more continuous and scenic. The original plan proposed a side path, which I did not put in, to connect to an isolated drumlin that would afford nice view of the river and marshlands.

So, now you know the history of the Helen Heyn Riverway and the contribution of the Knights of Tumsion. ■

Michael Clarke