

Newton Upper Falls Greenway

By Jim Lerner, member Newton Bicycle and Pedestrian Task Force

Editor's Note:

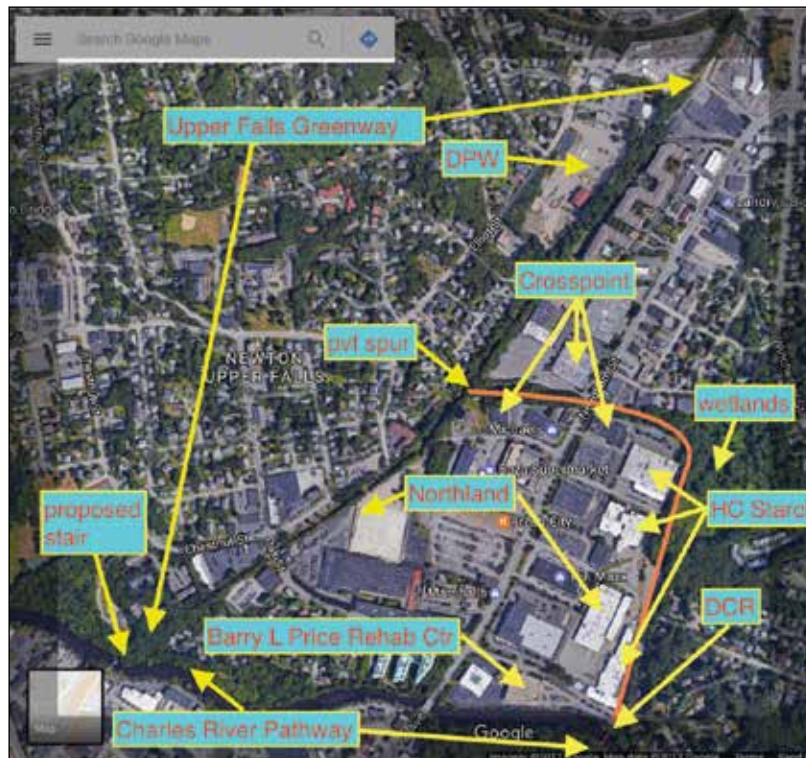
At the Newton Conservators annual dinner held on May 3, the Newton Conservators honored George Kirby, Jerry Reilly, and Jim Lerner with Environmentalist of the Year awards for their work in creating the Newton Upper Falls Greenway (see Newton Conservators' Annual Meeting article by Margaret Doris). The following article adds background information about the history of the Greenway, now a mile long walk located parallel to Needham Street in Newton.

The Newton Upper Falls Greenway has direct ties to the successful development of Newton and Boston from 160 years ago through today. Back in 1849, factory owner Otis Pettee began construction of a railroad line from Brookline to Dover to transport supplies and finished goods between his cotton mill and the markets. Ten years later, when Boston's Back Bay started to be filled in, the same railroad line was used to carry sand and gravel from an esker in Needham Heights to the swampy areas around Boston Neck. Forty-car trains ran every 45 minutes for four years to bring in the fill.

By the 1880s, both freight and passenger services were running on the line. Passenger service was discontinued in 1927 while freight continued. A spur line was built across Needham Street in 1953; you can still see the tracks crossing near Jiffy Lube. 2002 saw the last freight train, and by 2008 the Bay Colony Railroad discontinued service on the line (which extended south to Woonsocket, RI).

In late 2010, the Newton Bicycle/Pedestrian Task Force (BPTF), which had just successfully wrapped up advocacy for rehabbing the abandoned railroad bridge over the Charles River in Newton Lower Falls, was looking for a new opportunity. The idea of converting the abandoned railroad line to a linear park was very appealing, and we'd learned some lessons about how to gain grassroots approval from our previous project.

With those lessons in mind, the BPTF began taking city officials and neighbors on walks along the corridor to highlight the potential. In the spring of 2011 we had our first cleanup of the site, hauling out massive amounts of trash (sofas, TVs, tires, shopping carts, concrete pipes, etc.). As a boundary between residential and industrial areas, the railroad right-of-way had been everybody's favorite dumping ground as well as an encroachable piece of real estate. By making it something of value and a point of pride, the neighborhood and city could enjoy a better use.



Graphic showing the extent of the Upper Falls Greenway

At a community meeting in 2012 we introduced the idea of a linear park to a wider audience and were pleasantly surprised by strong community support and lack of opposition, even among abutters. With public backing clear, the newly-formed Upper Falls Area Council unanimously approved the request to support the creation of a park by the city. After passing through several aldermanic committees and then the full Board of Aldermen, the city agreed to pursue a 99-year lease from the MBTA, hired a contractor to remove the rails and creosote-soaked ties, and laid down a permeable stone-dust base. It was a long and dramatic construction process, but clearly worthwhile.

We now have a popular, well-used one-mile recreational path running from Easy Street (next to National Lumber), past the Depot Café and the Biltmore Café, all the way down to an overlook at the Charles River. Residents and

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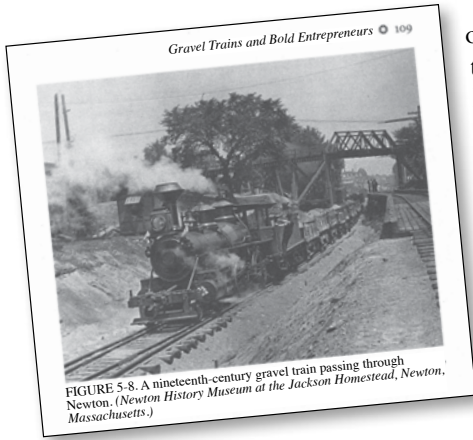


FIGURE 5-8. A nineteenth-century gravel train passing through Newton. (Newton History Museum at the Jackson Homestead, Newton, Massachusetts.)

office workers walk the Greenway at all hours of the day throughout the year. The Greenway is managed by Newton's Parks & Recreation Department and gets a lot of TLC from abutters and Upper Falls residents.

During NewtonSERVES this year, there were approximately 80 volunteers at work. The development process, a combination of public and private contributions, has resulted in stronger relationships with the commercial entities that call Newton their home and in a more meaningful set of relationships between residents and their representatives in City Hall.



PHOTO: JIM LERNER
Encroaching jungle on the Greenway path

There are still several important opportunities ahead to improve the Greenway. We're working with the Avalon apartment complex to remove the chain link fence

separating their property from the Greenway, an area that they intend to turn into gardens. Thirty Avalon residents cleared Asian bittersweet and barbed wire from the fence, and Avalon Bay property management is eager to create additional gateways.

CrossPoint and Northland, commercial landlords of numerous properties in the area (including Nexus, Marshalls Plaza, the former Clark's building, and others) have been very supportive of the Greenway. Both have donated benches and kiosks to the Greenway and see the path as an amenity for their tenants. As part of their special permit, CrossPoint has promised to convert the private spur along the south side of the Nexus property to a connecting path once the primary construction on the building site is completed. CrossPoint will also restore the brook that runs alongside, and they have already removed invasives from the border.

The Friends of the Greenway hope to construct a stairway to connect the Greenway at the Charles River, where there is a very steep embankment, to the Charles River Pathway (near river level, running along the river bank). Longer term, with the permission of several landowners on the other side of Needham Street, it's possible to connect the privately-owned spur via the DCR bridge at Christina Street with the DCR's Charles River Pathway on the Needham side of the river.

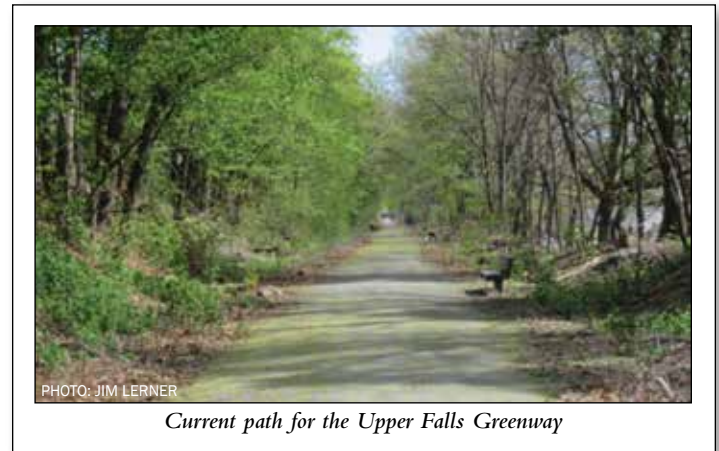


PHOTO: JIM LERNER

Current path for the Upper Falls Greenway

And in the very near term, we are tackling removal of invasives growing near the trail. We're pulling garlic mustard and cutting Asian bittersweet vines. We also have to deal with Japanese knotweed, glossy and common buckthorn, and Norway maple. It seems that we've won the battle against black locust, which had established a large and dense stand.



PHOTO: JIM LERNER

Newton SERVES cleanup crew

If you'd like to explore the Greenway yourself, there are several access points. From north to south, there's an entry at the end of Easy Street, a short public pathway

running from Chandler Place to the Greenway, as well as from Chestnut Street near Oak Street (next to the Depot Café).

If you're looking for more details or would like to get involved, please check out <http://www.upperfallsgreenway.org/>, <http://www.facebook.com/UpperFallsGreenway>, or info@UpperFallsGreenway.org. ■