

The Two Bridges Trail

By Ted Chapman, Two Bridges Riverside Trails Working Group



PHOTO: KEN MALLORY

Bridge over Route 95 connecting to Riverside MBTA

In October 2017, the Newton Conservators joined Bike Newton and the Lawrence and Lillian Solomon Foundation of Wellesley to administer a grant from the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation called the Recreation Trails Program. The goal of this grant is to study the Two Bridges Trail.

- The second bridge was built in 1950, is about 119 feet long, and crosses the Connector Road (in some documents referred to as Recreation Road). That gives access from Grove Street, to the Mass Pike (I-90), Recreation Road, Rt. 30/Commonwealth Ave, and I-95/Rt. 128 northbound.



Concept Diagram Topo map of Riverside Trail path courtesy of A Greener Greater Boston

While only 1,700 feet in length, the Two Bridges Trail represents a key opening to a bigger picture of trail development in the Charles River Reservation. It begins in Newton Lower Falls on a spur of Clearwater Street, then transverses a 340-foot gas line right of way on land owned by the City of Newton. After crossing two bridges

on a 700-foot-long abandoned railbed, it finally transverses both I-95/128 and the Connector Road to reach the Riverside MBTA station, where there are existing pedestrian trails along the Charles River.

There are two existing bridges on the abandoned Newton Lower Falls Branch of the Boston and Albany Railroad between Lower Falls and Riverside.

- The first bridge was built in 1961, is 151 feet long, and crosses I-95/Rt. 128.

This coalition, the Two Bridges Working Group, will engage engineering firms to provide information on the following issues: topography, site analysis, and an easement plan; structural assessment of the two bridges; design of rail systems, path surface, and adaptations to grade changes for access to the MBTA station and links to existing recreation trails in the area.

History of the path

The working group is carrying forward the vision of The Metropolitan Park Commission's report written in 1892 by the landscape architect Charles Eliot. He envisioned a park system along of the banks of the Charles, Neponset, and Mystic Rivers, the Blue Hills, the Middlesex Fells, and beaches in Lynn, Nahant, Winthrop, Quincy, and Nantasket. The natural river patterns provided a system of interconnected open spaces, accessible to even the most densely populated areas.

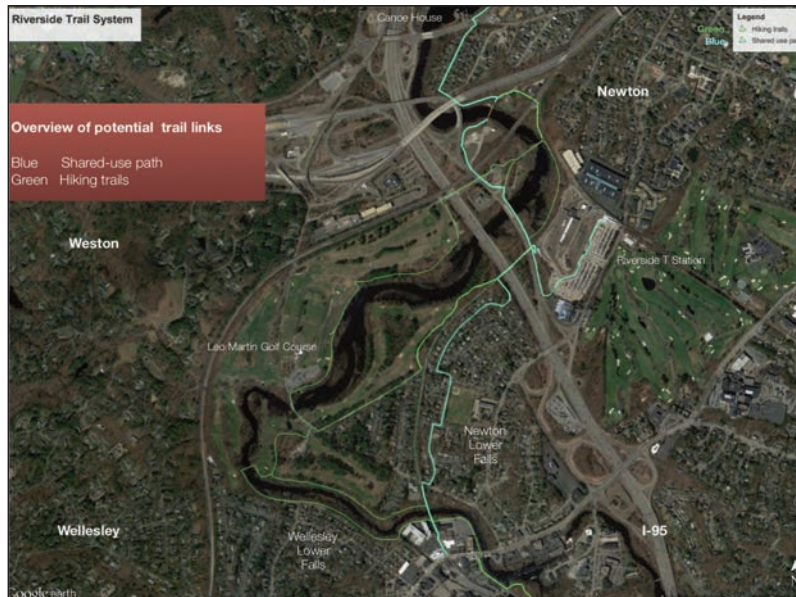
During the decade after the publication of the report in 1893, eighty percent of the current metropolitan park system was set aside as permanent public open space. The report gave the following description of the Newton section of the Charles river: "Within ten miles of Boston, there is a stretch of river scenery that cannot be surpassed in the United States."

The development of rail lines, including the 1842-1970 Newton Lower Falls Branch of the Boston and Albany

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Concept drawings courtesy of A Greener Greater Boston showing a proposal for the two bridges and MBTA



Concept drawings courtesy of A Greener Greater Boston showing an overview of potential trail links connecting to Riverside MBTA

Railroad, created recreational opportunities along the Charles Lake District in Auburndale. From 1897 to 1963 Norumbega Park provided boat rentals, theater, music, and dining opportunities to thousands. In the 1900s this section of the Charles was the most heavily canoed waterway the world.

The development of highways, regional infrastructure, and housing has since encroached upon this experience, but the river rolls on. Since the 1990s, the DCR created a multiuse recreation Charles River Reservation/Blue Heron trail extending from Boston to the Norumbega Park Conservation Area in Newton. The town of Wellesley

has an extensive trail system. The connecting links through Newton Lower Falls and Auburndale await development.

The concept of a bike/footpath through Newton Lower Falls was part of the 1969 comprehensive Recreation/Open Space Plan by the Newton Planning Department, authorizing the publication in 1975 of the Newton Conservation Commission Charles River Pathway. The following objectives of this pathway were listed:

1. To have a continuous footpath along the Charles River.
2. To conserve the banks of the Charles in as natural a setting as possible.
3. To add to outdoor recreational and educational opportunities available to the City.

In 2009, the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation's (DCR) Charles River Reservation Footbridge Projects/Trail Corridor Proposal linked construction of the pathway through Lower Falls on the unused rail line to the restoration of three footbridges crossing the Charles River. This proposal hoped to restore important links between the Charles River Bike Path and the Blue Heron Trail in Newton, reopening access to this spectacularly beautiful part of the Charles.

By 2015, using available funds from the state's Accelerated Bridge Program, two of the three bridges — the "Pony Truss" at Riverside Park in Weston and the "Trestle" bridge between Newton Lower Falls and Wellesley Hills — were completed. The third Recreation Road "Stringer" bridge, crossing from the MWRA pump station in Weston to Charles Street at the Lasell College boathouse in Newton, was delayed.

The Mass DCR's renewed interest in the Lower Falls pathway in 2009 met opposition by rail-trail abutters who filed a lawsuit against DCR. The controversy tore at the fabric of the Lower Falls community. In response, the Newton Lower Falls Improvement Association (LFIA) created a working group to look at alternatives to the rail trail. The group defined 24 path segments that could be variably linked to get from the Wellesley Bridge to the Lasell College boathouse.

In 2010 the Development at Riverside proposal began to be aired. The traffic issues associated with this project created a new incentive to look at alternative pathways

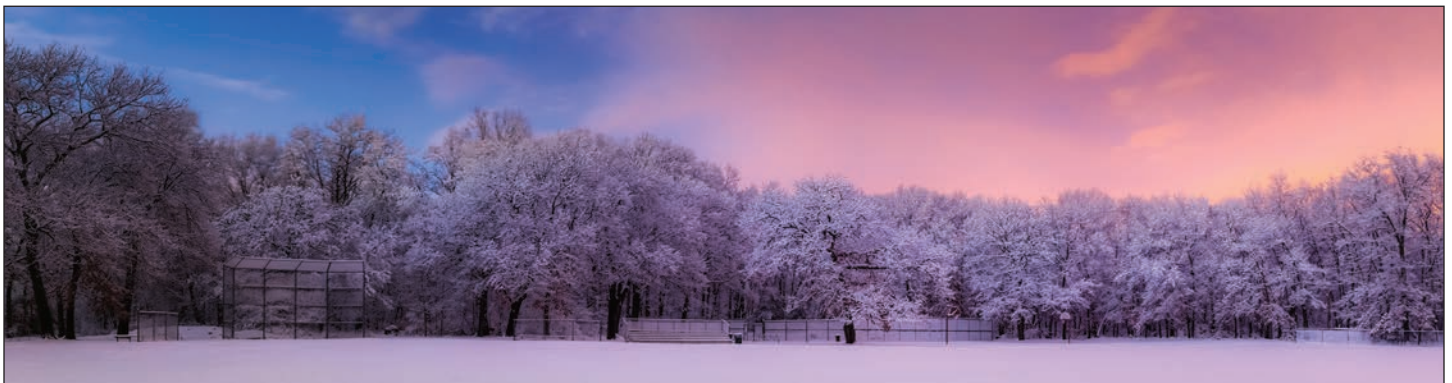
as safer pedestrian routes from Lower Falls to Riverside than negotiating the two proposed roundabouts on Grove Street. Through the active lobbying of the larger Newton community and city counselors, the special permit granted to the developer created mitigation funds for projects like trails. In late 2016, a new developer has assumed the lease at Riverside; plans for the site and surrounding roads have yet to be revealed.

In 2016 the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Courts ruled on the appeal from the Massachusetts Land Court by the plaintiffs who had brought suit against the DCR; the ruling found that the decommissioning of a rail line is a federal issue. This finding could open the door to movement on the rail trail through Lower Falls becoming a reality. There remains some opposition from abutters in the Lower Falls Community to opening the full rail trail corridor. The Two Bridges Trail deliberately avoids 90% of the rail line in favor of using the street grid and pedestrian trails along the river defined by the LFIA study.

Benefits

The Two Bridges pathway achieves an important goal without using the bulk of the mile-long rail line through Lower Falls and therefore creating further dissent in the Lower Falls community. The trail creates continuity of routes for pedestrians and bicyclists between Wellesley and Riverside by using existing streets and alternate pedestrian routes. With the support of the Appalachian Mountain Club and the DCR, the working group will map and develop these alternative foot paths along the Charles River adding to a regional path system along one of the most beautiful sections of the Charles River. The project's advisory committee will involve stakeholders from multiple communities that abut the extended trail system — Wellesley, Newton, and Weston — and regional bike pedestrian advocates. ■

Photo Feature: Auburndale Park After a Heavy Snowstorm, by Jonathan Elcock



MISSION

Newton Conservators, Inc.

The Newton Conservators promotes the protection and preservation of natural areas, including parks, playgrounds, forests and streams, which are open or may be converted to open space for the enjoyment and benefit of the people of Newton. It further aims to disseminate information about these and other environmental matters.

A primary goal is to foster the acquisition of land, buildings and other facilities to be used for the encouragement of scientific, educational, recreational, literary and other public pursuits that will promote good citizenship and the general welfare of the people of our community.

The Newton Conservators was formed as a not-for-profit organization 56 years ago in June 1961.

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