



**NEWTON
CONSERVATORS**

SPRING ISSUE

NEWSLETTER

*Newton's land trust working to preserve
open space since 1961*

NEWTONCONSERVATORS.ORG • SPRING 2021



NEWTON CONSERVATORS

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Saving Houghton Pond

For years, people had been telling me of a beautiful garden with a pond located in the Chestnut Hill section of Newton. At the time, my mother was living with us but was confined to a wheelchair in order to travel any distance. She loved short trips to the outdoors, so we checked out the

Newton Conservators' trail guide to locate Houghton Garden, one of the few open spaces in Newton with an accessible trail then. What a delightful afternoon we had

there, with its beautiful lush green paths, colorful flowers, stone bridges, and lovely vistas, seemingly out of a Thomas Kinkadee painting.

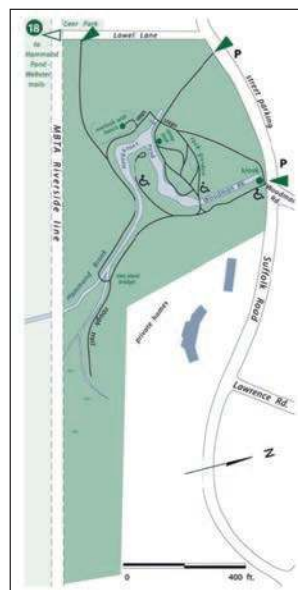
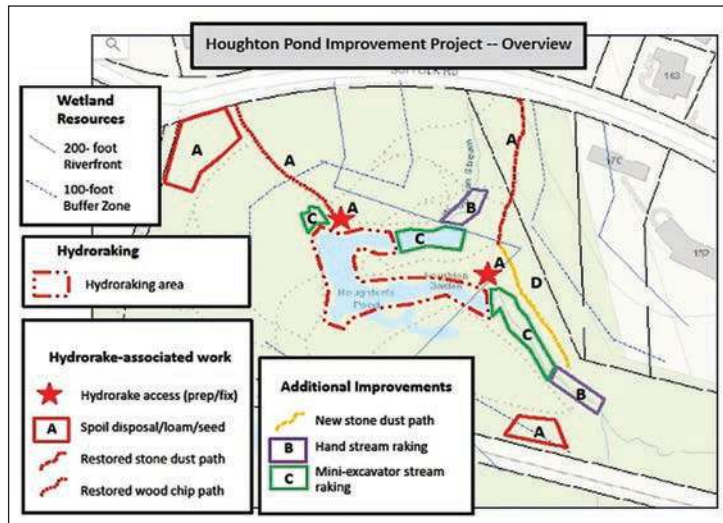
To those who also wish to seek out this "Secret Garden," the Newton Conservators' webpage on Houghton Garden

(<https://newtonconservators.org/property/houghton-garden/>) is a great starting point,

leading to useful maps and a number of articles espousing the rich history, beauty, and nature of this incredibly special peaceful refuge in Newton. There are three entrances:

one at the intersection of Suffolk Road and Woodman Road, one at the junction of Suffolk Road and Clovelly Road, and another on Lowell Lane near the MBTA tracks. All three are in Chestnut Hill with plentiful street parking along Suffolk Road.

The garden was started in 1910 by Martha Gilbert Houghton, who lived in the Spanish mission-style house at 152 Suffolk Road. The garden was acquired by the City of Newton in 1968 via eminent domain, with



Trail guide map off Suffolk Road



PHOTO: TED KUKLINSKI

Houghton Garden Main Gate

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Memorial Plaque,
Photo Ted Kuklinski

another small portion added in 1979, and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1999. Our website describes Houghton Garden thusly: *"Its gracious paths, overhung by azalea and rhododendron, wind around a stream and lagoon-like pond... The alpine rock garden on a ledge overlooking Houghton Pond was one of the first of its kind. Especially lovely are the*

climbing hydrangea, the naturalized lily of the valley, the wood hyacinth, the umbrella pine, and other exotic evergreens." The ten-acre wild garden was designed by both Martha and Clement Houghton with assistance from Olmsted Associate Warren Manning, who designed the water feature that magically helped create a natural appearance.

Central to the appeal of the garden is Houghton Pond and the streams that flow in and out of it. Over the last century, there was a buildup of vegetative material on the bottom of the pond and overgrowth of the narrow streams, which hindered the flow necessary for a healthy ecosystem. On occasion, the shallower-than-original pond would overflow and flood the area and adjacent paths, which had already suffered significant wear and tear.



PHOTO: TED KUKLINSKI

Decreased Depth in Houghton Pond



PHOTO: TED KUKLINSKI

Dam showing reduced depth

As a conservation area, Houghton Garden is under the jurisdiction of the Newton Conservation Commission (ConCom). The Chestnut Hill Garden Club and Friends of Houghton Garden have helped maintain the garden in past years. There were a number of hearings in the spring of 2020 on a plan brought forward by Councilor Lisle Baker among others

to correct the flooding and pathway degradation issues. ConCom has a modest yearly budget for special projects and voted on a plan to clean out the accumulated material at Houghton Pond as one of its 2020 projects.

ConCom elected to go with a special process called hydroraking, which had also been utilized recently at a number of the ponds at the Newton Cemetery. Only one firm in the area, Solitude Lake Management, performs this type of work and had the specialized equipment needed.



PHOTO: LISLE BAKER

Hydroraking in process

The hydroraker is something that might be described as a backhoe with a rake attachment, mounted on a pair of large pontoons, propelled by large independently-rotating paddle wheels used for steering and propulsion. The hydroraker can maneuver anywhere where the water depth is sufficient — about a foot and a half or more. When operating, it scooped up the organic bottom material accumulated on the bottom of the pond over the years into its large rake-like claw, which allowed it to drain the water. It then maneuvered to an access point on the shore, where it deposited the material into a large porous metal container.

From the collection container, the material was transported to another area in Houghton Garden that lacked nutrients in the soil. This location is at the northwest edge of the garden at Lowell Lane and Suffolk Road. When this area was covered, the remaining



PHOTO: TED KUKLINSKI

Disposal Area for Material Removed.



Transferring Pond Material for Transport

material will make an ideal base for new plantings in the spring.

The state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) had a few concerns that held up starting the project for a period of time. After a somewhat rainy spring, drought conditions over the summer led to insufficient water levels for the hydroraking equipment. In the northeast corner of the garden, there is a stone and concrete dam which restricts the flow of the streams with a board system, thus creating the pond itself.



Hydroraker near dam

When the rains came in the fall, an unknown visitor to the pond literally pulled the plug on the project by removing the wooden boards at the dam that had been installed to raise the water level. But eventually with boards locked in place, the pond was full enough again, the hydroraker had a window of time available, and the actual pond work began in late November.

They made great progress, even as the weather turned colder into December, but there was concern that the pond would freeze over. At the end of the hydroraking workdays allocated for the work, it was discovered that there was the option of removing a little more depth of accumulated material in the pond. Since the equipment was in place and additional funds became available, the pond was able to be cleaned to the bottommost layer, with work taking place almost up to Christmas through a major snowstorm!

material was enough to fill an old swimming pool within the nearby “old deer park” area, also under ConCom jurisdiction. The rich pond-bottom

Additional tree work, planting, and path restoration work is planned for the spring.

The hydroraking access preparation, disposal, and pathway work were not in ConCom’s budget, but thanks to a generous neighborhood fundraising effort organized by Ken Lyons, John Grandin, and Fred Hochberg of the Chestnut Hill Association (CHA), the other components of the project were contracted to respected local landscape firm, Robert Hanss, Inc. Councilor Baker also helped facilitate this effort with the neighbors, the ConCom, and the Conservators. For this portion of the project, Newton Conservators was able to accept donations into a dedicated fund and coordinate with Newton’s Environmental Planner, Jennifer Steel, and CHA in monitoring and inspecting the work performed.



Accessible Path and Cleared Stream

Visitors will appreciate additional improvements to the garden. New special access paths were constructed and restored after the hydroraking equipment was removed. The streams into and out of the pond itself were trimmed back and dug out manually during the summer. In addition, a beautiful new accessible stone dust path was constructed extending beyond the previous path.

Mrs. Houghton would likely be pleased to see her garden still being used and appreciated so long after its inception and now, with its channels and pond cleaned out, for another 100 years! Changes are still afoot as the Chestnut Hill Garden Club will shortly concentrate on highlighting the rock garden section of the Garden. Whether you want to meditate on nature, exercise, walk your dog on leash, take pictures, or watch birds, Houghton Garden is a special place worth seeking out! ♦

☙ Ted Kuklinski