

Cover Story
Nashua's Lost River: Finding Salmon Brook
By Patty Caya

the
Hippo
HippoPress Nashua
December 9, 2004

Salmon Brook is barely noticed as it sneaks through the city—but that's about to change

Nashua will soon get a new park.

It's one that city officials, a whole lot of Rotarian, and a member of Congress are making a big fuss about this week. The park, set on a modest-sized parcel of land along lower Main Street, will occupy land that's been a prominent eyesore for decades.

The new park will return beauty to a small part of a once-cherished waterway, Salmon Brook. And it's only a small portion of plans to tap the brook's potential as a recreational resource—one that could greatly enhance the quality of life for future generations of city residents.

It's not a new idea. Generations of Nashua residents, dating back to before there was a "Nashua," have used, relied on and benefited from Salmon Brook.

This mild-mannered waterway runs its course through Nashua from the Massachusetts border through the southwest quadrant of the city, meandering quietly through neighborhoods and backyards.

It crosses major streets on which we drive every day and makes a brief appearance on Main Street (between Lake and Allds streets), running under a vacant lot. It flows over a dam and then goes underground.

It then passes unceremoniously beneath the asphalt expanse of the Main Street Market Place and its sprawling parking lot. After a brief journey under the shopping center, it re-emerges to make its way to the Merrimack River.

Despite all this face time around the city, it has very little real presence in the community. In the eyes of many, it remains Nashua's lost river, an unnoticed stream with no relevance or practical use to today's city residents.

This was not always so. Ask any Nashua old-timer and they will speak fondly of an era two generations ago when Salmon Brook was an intrinsic part of the recreational and economic lifeblood of the city.

Its old-fashioned swimming holes provided the social and recreational outlet for children in South End neighborhoods. Fish were caught along its banks and people ice-skated on its frozen surface in the winter. For older Nashuans, Salmon Brook is an integral part of their history.

But for most people outside of this group, Salmon Brook is a complete unknown. They may ask, "What's the big deal?"

Ask any newcomer or a resident under say, the age of 50, about Salmon Brook and you are likely to receive a blank stare in response, or "the Salmon what?" or "Where's that?" or "I've never heard of it."

What happened to Salmon Brook is a story of inevitable change in the name of progress, not some environmental catastrophe or act of civic or corporate malfeasance.

It fell out of use and then out of favor, being pushed to the edge of people's consciousness, until it was nearly forgotten. By this time next year, however, it may once again be a household name throughout the city.

Hidden from view

While Salmon Brook may have fallen away from public notice, a small section of it has always been a part of downtown in form of a large vacant lot directly across from the Main Street Market Place, flanked on either side by Steve King Auto and The Adult Learning Center, which is housed in the former James B. Crowley School.

It is on this site that the new park will be built.

The site of a succession of industrial buildings, it was last home to the International Paper Box Machine Co. The lot was abandoned when the company moved its operations to Northeastern Boulevard in the 1960s and has since become an eyesore. The site has fallen deeper into decay; time and misuse have taken their toll on the property.

What most people may not know about this vacant lot is that beneath the rotting foundation, chain-link fence and signs warning, "Danger Keep Out" flows the brook.

Beneath the rubble, Vale Dam still regulates the Brook's flow. This same dam once harnessed the water's power to turn 225-horsepower turbines, supplying power to the Vale Textile Mill back in 1845.

Even today, the sound of the powerful waterfall can be heard cascading down in a torrent before it goes undercover and slips beneath the shopping center across the street.

That single plot of land has come into focus recently as a gateway to restoring Salmon Brook to its former prominence. A confluence of events is promising to provide the necessary funding to fulfill the city's plan to develop that vacant lot into a public park.

It's hoped that this project will serve not just as the next step in the city's Main Street Master Plan, but also as the the spark that focuses attention on the long anticipated Salmon Brook Greenway.

As currently proposed, the Greenway will be a series of connected trails providing walking paths and public access to the brook from Lund Road all the way to the Merrimack River.

These two projects are in the news this week because the city, with the help of \$250,000 in federal funding secured by U.S. Rep. Charles Bass (R-N.H.) and a \$100,000 donation from the Nashua Rotary Club has secured funding to complete the park part of the project.

The future of the Greenway remains in the planning stages. Initial plans were laid out in 2001 during a community design meeting. These efforts were boosted by a grant from the National Park Service.

Restoring the Brook will require complicated and lengthy efforts on the part of volunteers and city officials, including Katherine E. Hersh, community development director for the City of Nashua.

Though the city owns many parcels along the path of the proposed greenway, many are privately owned. Many of these property owners have become the unofficial stewards of portions of the brook.

While the brook receded into the city's memory, it remained at the forefront of these residents' attention and they have strong opinions about its future. And not all of them favor the idea of the park or the Greenway.

To play out this next phase of re-development will likely require a series of careful steps; a calculated, strategic effort, like lining up the pieces on a chess board, with each move orchestrated to achieve a goal several steps down the line.

Time will tell if the moves will end in checkmate or merely in a stalemate, with some splashy progress around the new park, while plans for the Greenway gather dust on the shelf.

Brief brook background

Salmon Brook's use can be traced back to the area's first native people, who saw it as a source of food.

Early white settlers used the power of the brook for sawmills and then gristmills. Later, they dammed the brook and harnessed the energy to power larger industries.

Nashua's rivers offered power for industry, and by 1845 Vale Mills had set up a small cotton manufacturing facility on the now dormant land where the brook disappears under Main Street. The same spot housed a blacksmith shop and a machine shop for Ami George, where he built the first railway spike machine in the U.S.

The turn of the century brought Elie LaBombarde to the location, where he operated the International Paper Box Machine Company until the late 1960s. Once IPBM moved out, industry never returned.

Salmon Brook also provided generations of Nashuans a prime source of recreation. The brook provided swimming holes where neighborhood children spent their summers. Nashua's immigrant populations adopted their own swimming holes and gave them names like "Polack hole" and "French hole."

The largest swimming spot, Fields Grove, offered Red Cross swimming lessons for children and was set up with lifeguards and a bathhouse.

By the mid-20th century, however, the swimming holes were permanently closed. Children instead spent summers at the city's municipal pools.

As use of the brook waned, so did interest in its upkeep. It fell out of the pervuew of most residents and city planners.

For the past half-century, it seemed to have fallen off the radar of everyone except those most intimate with it—the people who live along its shores.

A walk in the park

"It's been an eyesore for at least a generation. And downtown (low income) Nashua hasn't had a park for at least that long."

-Jeff Levine, Rotary Club Member and V.P. Towers Motor Parts

Fast forward to Monday, Dec. 6, 2004. The weekly Rotary Club meeting at the Nashua Country Club is a host to several guests—among them, Congressmen Bass, Katherine Hersh, and a table full of aldermen. They're all gathered to announce victory in securing funding for the new park.

The occasion is not merely the announcement of a new park, but the announcement of a successful joint venture between public and private funding sources that will make the park possible.

Funds provided by the state Department of Transportation, federal funding secured by Congressman Bass and a donation from the Nashua Rotary Club will provide nearly all the money required to complete the project.

In an artists' rendering, the Vale Dam area on the west side of Main Street is exposed to reveal a stone archway from 1848. A walkway brings pedestrians down to a canoe launch and access to a walking path that extends around the brook, all the way to Bishop Guertin High School. A preliminary sketch features an amphitheater and even a labyrinth.

The plans aren't intended to suggest what will be, but rather what could be. With the funding secured, a professional park designer will be hired by the city and formal planning meetings will include key civic and business leaders and any interested residents.

When completed, the park will fall under the jurisdiction of the city's Parks & Recreation Department. Nick Caggiano, superintendent of parks describes the process like this, "We need the funding, plus a year for design and planning, wetlands, flagging and permits and the boards you have to get approval from: zoning, planning, Park Rec., Advisory Board, D.P.W., etcetera. That takes months and months. The construction is the last phase—and the easiest."

Hersh announces at the Rotary meeting that with the funding now in place, the project will go ahead. The planning phase should be complete by early to mid-summer.

The city's Master Plan calls for extending walkable Main Street all the way down to Allds Street; this park would be a significant step toward that goal.

Putting it together

Kathy Hersh, describes how she approaches community development projects like the Salmon Brook Greenway. "What we try to do is be ready," she says, "So that if an opportunity comes along we can act on it."

It's easy to be fooled by the confidence she conveys about how things flow together. Coordinating a project like Salmon Brook requires well-orchestrated moves and vigilance in keeping track of all the possible players.

The Greenway project has been on the radar of many city officials for years, including Hersh. When the state widened the F.E. Everett Turnpike back in the 1990s, they were required to buy mitigation land to compensate for the land lost to the highway project.

This gave the city a chance to lobby for the state to acquire the former IPBM lot on Main Street. Though the D.O.T. would have preferred to acquire a parcel that required less clean-up, the city made their case for the proposed project and the state Department of Transportation agreed.

Along with the D.O.T.'s acquisition came an assessment and an estimate of the cost to develop the site as the city envisioned. A price of \$600,000 was determined, of which the state would pay \$235,000.

To complete the funding picture, city officials met with Bass in February 2004 and asked him to secure federal funding. Bass, recognizing the value of the project and its importance to the city, made his pitch for funds to be drawn from the FY05 Omnibus Appropriations Act. This bill passed the House late last month, allowing Bass to announce \$250,000 in funding for the project last week.

Meanwhile, the Rotary Club was researching potential projects to support. A total of 40 ideas were on the list, including the park proposal. This project, with its high visibility and potential impact on downtown, was a good match for the substantial funds put aside toward a worthy project for group's 100th anniversary.

With the Rotary Club's \$100,000 contribution, the park's \$600,000 budget is now within reach for the city and planning will commence immediately.

Along with their contribution, the Rotary Club also retains naming rights to the new park, which is tentatively called Rotary Park.

For Hersh, park funding is indeed a victory, but it is only one part of the total Greenway picture.

"We just received our national award letter from the National Park Service River & Trails Program. They will be giving us technical assistance to do the Salmon Brook Greenway," Hersh said.

Unlike the park funding, the National Park Service grant provides resources and expertise rather than money. This kind of expertise is just as important as funding for trail building.

A public design session for the Greenway took place in 2001, which generated a sense of goodwill toward the project and resulted in a glossy brochure available on the city's Web site, www.gonashua.com.

It outlines the project's goals, intended pathways and potential design features. It will serve as a jumping off point when the Greenway moves forward, buoyed by the momentum generated by the visibility of the new park.

But not everyone thinks the Greenway is such a hot idea.

Not in my backyard

"I physically stop the kids from throwing the picnic tables in the pond, I'd hate to see them open the rest of the waterway to the same kind of abuse."

-Scott Rogers, owns property adjacent to Salmon Brook and Fields Grove

This story has another side, one that doesn't include ribbon-cutting ceremonies or naming rights or blue-blazered politicians.

The other side of this story begins just a few hundred yards down stream, at Fields Grove, the once popular swimming hole. Fields Grove is the current site of a park similar to the one proposed. It has a footbridge to the neighborhood and recreational amenities.

This park has a basketball court whose chain-link fence has been broken into pieces and thrown into the brook. It once had picnic tables for visitors until teenage vandals threw them in the water also. Many types of wildlife live freely in this park including a number of ducks. Neighbors have seen these ducks shot at by teenagers with BB guns.

Once a neighborhood treasure, the park has become home to vagrants and vandals. Some residents fear opening up the Greenway further downstream will just lead to more destruction out of the site from authorities.

"I physically stop the kids from throwing the picnic tables in the pond," says Scott Rogers, whose property abuts the proposed Greenway and looks out on Fields Grove. "I'd hate to see them open the rest of the waterway to the same kind of abuse. Kids there will be partying all around it (the brook), instead of just in the park."

His wife Patti has seen so many shopping carts thrown in the brook, she now pays the kids for each one they don't throw in.

What Rogers and his wife have witnessed in the past three years has been a steady stream of teenagers partying and young adults destroying the park property and using the paths as late-night hangouts and drinking spots.

Other homeowners in the vicinity of Fields Grove have posted multiple signs warning trespassers to "Keep Out." "Private Property" signs are nailed to the trees all along the water.

Frank Davis of Nashua comes to Fields Grove five times per week to feed the ducks. He grew up in the neighborhood near the country club and remembers swimming at Fields Grove.

"This place was jumpin' in the old days," he says as he points to the place where the lifeguard stand once stood, which is now part of the parking lot. "I learned to swim here."

He recalls a time when kids would ice skate on the frozen brook in the winter, starting away from the bridge at Fields Grove and skating all the way toward what is now the back of the Brooks Pharmacy.

The stories are a stark contrast to his current impressions.

"They throw bicycles off the bridge and picnic tables in the water," he says as he breaks off some more bread for the expectant ducks at his feet. He recounts incidents of kids throwing rocks at the ducks. He grouses as he talks about the destruction he has witnessed. He doesn't believe that added foot traffic from the Greenway would solve these problems.

He seriously considers the idea for a moment, and then says, "It might be good if they have more security."

Rogers has spent the better part of the last three years working to try to address the problems of litter, vandalism, drugs, indigents and wildlife abuse by attempting to involve the proper authorities and city departments. He has filed reports and lodged complaints with the police, the Parks Department, various city departments and the state Fish & Game Department.

While each organization has listened with an empathic ear, the results have been minimal and hard-won. He points to a floodlight that illuminates the bridge connects his neighborhood to the park. "I had to fight to get this," he says with obvious irritation.

The bridge serves as a hangout for the teenagers at night and allows them to see if a patrol arrives. "If they see a police car, they throw their joints in the brook," says Rogers.

The new park, situated right on Main Street, is unlikely to have the same level of destruction because of its high visibility. But the proposed Greenway, in its route from Lund Road to Main Street, passes through a variety of neighborhoods.

These are the same neighborhoods that both the city and the Rotary Club hope will benefit from the new park. But these are also the same neighborhoods that seem to foster the kinds of behavior Rogers has been rallying to remedy these past few years.

A brook runs through it

"I can visualize the waterfall as the focal point in a beautiful landscape layout, with bridges for stores or businesses, rising on either side."

-Florence Shepard, noted Nashua historian

Florence Shepard, a former Nashua historian and head reference librarian at the Nashua Public Library wrote a Nashua Telegraph column for many years called "Reference Point." In it, she answered questions about obscure Nashua facts and history. Her response to a question about the long vacant lot on Main Street included this idea: "I can visualize the waterfall as the focal point in a beautiful landscape layout, with bridges for stores or businesses, rising on either side."

Shepard did not live to see her vision fulfilled, but perhaps one of her descendants will one day enjoy the Main Street she envisioned. Sitting at the Dunkin' Donuts across the street, they may one day gaze not at an overgrown lot, but at Nashua's once lost river as it cascades over a picturesque waterfall on its way to the Merrimack.