



# Willimantic River Review

Fall 2007

## WRA Awarded Grant

The Alliance received a matching grant to add the **Willimantic River Greenway Parks and Trails Guide** to our website. This Last Green Valley mini-grant of \$877 is funded by the Quinebaug-Shetucket Heritage Corridor and will be matched by volunteer work to produce this one-stop reference for walking and biking opportunities.

The guide will include maps of park and trail locations along the 25-mile state Greenway from Stafford to Willimantic. Each urban or rural location will have photos and text for a guided tour. The goal is to invite visitors to enjoy riverside outings and discover the history and natural features of the river and its tributaries. This guide will complement the boating guide that was added to the website in 2006, thanks to a previous Corridor grant. Watch our website for the new guide in the Spring of 2008. Meanwhile, if you have digital photos of a riverside park (from Stafford Springs to Willimantic) to contribute to this guide, we would appreciate hearing from you at [info@willimanticriver.org](mailto:info@willimanticriver.org).

## Riverwatch

The Alliance's mission includes advocating for the protection of the river and its watershed so everyone can enjoy this great natural resource. In recent months, WRA provided testimony to local and state officials expressing our concerns about potential threats to the river.

**TOLLAND/WILLINGTON** In May, the Ct. Department of Transportation (DOT) presented a proposal for replacing the **Route 74 bridge** over the river between Tolland and Willington and raising it 5 feet above its current level to avoid flood damage to the bridge's structure. The entrance to part of Nye-Holman State Forest is adjacent to this bridge. The Alliance submitted testimony noting its concerns about access from a raised roadway to the Forest, which hosts a

popular canoe/kayak launch site and the south section of the Cole Wilde Trout Management Area, which has year-round catch-and release fishing. There are also potential negative impacts on the river's water quality and on its banks during construction. A copy of these comments can be read in the News section of our website.

**MANSFIELD** May also brought the unveiling of the **University of Connecticut's Water Supply Plan for 2007-8**. The Plan's first-page summary noted that there was enough water for current and proposed water uses by the University and by homes, businesses and Town of Mansfield buildings in the adjacent Storrs area. The Alliance found that this claim was not supported by details in the plan. We submitted recommendations for revisions to the plan so that it clearly stated the need to establish the actual amount of water available from the Willimantic River well field before the river was negatively affected. We also requested that the University begin planning for additional sources of water and a larger water storage capacity on campus to supplement the Willimantic River and Fenton River well fields during dry seasons and to accommodate additional users. A copy of WRA's comments can be read in the News section of our website.

The lack of rainfall this August and September has shown that the Alliance's concerns are well-founded. The Fenton River wells were closed down on July 26 to prevent damage to that river, and, when students returned, the Willimantic River wells were the only source of water. Even with a request for conservation measures on campus and in town, the wells did draw down the river's level on the first day of classes. Management of the system since then has minimized dips in this level, but the aquifer's groundwater level is dropping, and the river continues to be very low in spite of a recent rainstorm.

## Riverwatch (continued)

This situation occurred during a typical start for UConn's fall classes, and it clearly shows that additional users would create an even greater stress on the water supply system. As of late September, a conservation mandate continues, due to low rainfall. The University has plans for studies concerning water recycling projects and an additional well in the Willimantic River watershed. A low-flow study for the river will have its scope approved this year, and its projected completion is at least two years away. WRA representatives continue to attend UConn Water and Wastewater Advisory Committee meetings and to advocate for developing a larger water supply sooner rather than later.

In June, the Alliance commented on the **Storrs Downtown project** and recommended that this large project (with 800 apartments and a variety of businesses) be approved in phases. This would allow information from a pending assessment of available water in the Willimantic River well field to guide decisions about how to insure a reliable water supply to this development. Requests from other local apartment complexes for use of UConn water are also of concern.

**WINDHAM** In September the Alliance commented on two **proposed developments in Willimantic**. Lowe's intends to build a store and large parking lot in a flood plain adjacent to the river. Also, a former American Thread building is proposed for renovation into an 84-unit apartment complex. WRA commented at hearings about these proposals, requesting that officials take a close look at the erosion and sedimentation plans as well as the stormwater management plans for any such projects. In addition, WRA requested that such plans utilize the best current management practices and technology, in order to minimize their impacts on the water quality of the Willimantic River. We noted that the success of many river-related projects in Willimantic, most notably the Whitewater Park project, depends on the water quality of the Willimantic River.

## The Greenway Grows

In 2003, the Alliance nominated the river as an official state greenway. Since then, nine riverside towns have completed or initiated greenway projects. The News page of the WRA website has information about these projects.

In July the Willimantic Whitewater Park gained ground when the Willimantic Whitewater Partnership purchased a 3.4-acre parcel along the river on the east side of Bridge Street in downtown Willimantic. This parcel is the first step toward a linear urban park along the river and a whitewater venue in the river. This long-term park development project anchors the south end of the Willimantic River Greenway. Plans for this parcel include a welcome center for visitors and for those biking or hiking along the emerging East Coast Greenway.

## Calendar

Monday, October 8

**Riverside "Scavenger Hunt"** Fun for all ages on this easy 1 ½ hour walk in Riverview Trail Park along a scenic stretch of the river in Coventry. Use clues to discover sights, sounds and history with naturalist Sue Harrington. Meet at 10 A.M. Sponsored by the Alliance and Coventry Parks and Rec. Dept. as part of the Quinebaug-Shetucket Heritage Corridor's Walking Weekends. Directions: From junction with Rt. 195 in Mansfield, go south on Rt. 32 for 0.8 miles. Turn right on Merrow Rd., cross RR track, then bridge. Turn right onto Riverview Dr., park by roadside.

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View previous newsletters at  
[www.willimanticriver.org](http://www.willimanticriver.org)

## Willi River Ramble

Take a leisurely stroll in Stafford's Hyde Park. This one-mile walk is around the park's riverside section in a hidden green valley next to downtown Stafford Springs. Visit the historic mineral springs and walk along Middle River just upstream of where it joins Furnace Brook at the headwaters of the Willimantic River

**DIRECTIONS:** From the south: Follow Rt. 32 (Main Street) as it crosses the railroad tracks and turns left around the Holt Fountain. In 500 feet, turn left onto Spring Street, which immediately crosses an arched bridge over the Middle River. The park entrance is the first driveway on the right between stone walls. Park on the left behind the Stafford Historical Society's museum.

A good place to start is the at the Historical Society's Museum, which is open on the second Sunday of the month (or on Thursday in July and August) between 2 and 4 p.m. The museum's Hyde Park exhibit includes photos of the park 100 years ago; other exhibits illustrate the history of the mineral springs resort. Between the museum and the adjacent church, you will find one of the two mineral springs. "Iron water" flows out of the base of a stone shelter. It has a strong flavor, but is drinkable for most people. The "sulfur spring" is next to stone steps behind the baseball diamond, but it is currently sealed with a concrete cover.

These springs originally flowed out of the hill and across the level field to the Middle River. The Nipmuck tribe visited the springs, which reportedly "made them lively." In the 1700's, colonists began traveling there for medical cures. This became America's first "health spa" with grand hotels to accommodate visitors. The Converse family owned a hotel and both springs from the mid-1800's until the early 1900's. They also sold bottled spring water, which was advertised as a cure for various ills. (The museum is in the former Converse office and bottling plant.) Eventually, the spring water and soda business moved to West Street, so now the springs are part of the park, and visitors can sample the water.

At Hyde Park's entrance a stone monument honors Civil War soldiers. Walk past this to the bank of the Middle River, which is ponded behind a dam downstream. In summer, perennial flower gardens bloom along the

fence. Stone walls guide the flow of the river past a mill on the opposite shore. In 1839 the Converse family built a water-powered mill there to manufacture wool cloth. The family's stately home was on the hill at the far end of the park. Today you can see a brick building (the former Stafford High School and middle school), where the house stood until it burned down in 1929.

In the 1800's, the park was part of the Converse estate, known as "Woodlawn." Julius Converse rode in his carriage along paths that led down the hill, across the field and over the river to his mill. Look for the old bridge pier still standing mid-river. The Converse mill burned in 1911 and was replaced in 1916 by the brick mill you now see across the river. It currently houses the American Sleeve Bearing Company. The town purchased the 150-acre Woodlawn estate in 1911 with funds given to the Town by Isaac Perkins Hyde, and it became Hyde Park. Then the sulfur springs were given shelter and a pump, and the first baseball diamond was installed.

To continue this walk, follow the riverbank past the ball fields and tennis court. The river runs noisily over stones in this section. At the bridge, turn left onto the road (Highland Terrace) and walk up to the school building, passing the Hyde Park Duck Pond. At the parking lot across from the school is the entrance to Woodlawn Trail, which leads uphill to the rest of Hyde Park and to ridgetop views of the Willimantic River valley. (This trail will be featured in a future Ramble.)

Walk around the former school to enjoy a view of lower Hyde Park and the river. One can imagine the Converse family sitting on their porch and looking out over the valley and river. From the school you can take the high road or the low road back to the museum. The low road (Hyde Park Road) follows one of Converse's carriage roads along the base of the hill past the sulfur spring and baseball diamonds. The high road is a steep climb up the Highland Terrace road, which is lined with early 1900's homes. This road gradually descends past the church and iron spring to the museum.

*Thanks to Isobel Zabilansky and the Stafford Historical Society for their assistance with this Ramble.*

**Willimantic River Alliance – Membership Form**

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address \_\_\_\_\_  
 Town \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_  
 E-Mail \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Contact me about volunteer opportunities for the WRA

Mail completed form and check to:

**WRA at P.O. Box 9193, Bolton CT 06043-9193**

Memberships	Annual Dues
Senior/Student	\$ 5.00
Individual	\$10.00
Family	\$15.00
River Steward	\$ 50.00
Patron	\$ 250.00
	(Lifetime Member)

**Thank you for joining the Alliance! Your membership dues are tax deductible.**

# **Willimantic River Alliance**

Founded in 1996, the Alliance has a mission “to protect and preserve the Willimantic River through cooperative and educational activities that promote regional awareness, stewardship, and enjoyment of the river and its watershed.” As a coalition of citizens, officials and local agencies, the Alliance sponsors events such as regional forums and outings and publications, including a newsletter and website [www.willimanticriver.org](http://www.willimanticriver.org). Our email address is [info@willimanticriver.org](mailto:info@willimanticriver.org).

Willimantic River Alliance, Inc. is a nonprofit 501 (c) (3) tax-exempt corporation. The Alliance promotes development of the Willimantic River Greenway, an official state greenway along the river's 25 miles from Stafford Springs to Willimantic. This regional project aims to connect recreational, historical and natural resource features along the river. These connections are being created by the nine riverside towns through natural resource preservation and recreation projects, such as linking trails and improving access to the river.

The river's watershed includes seventeen towns: (in Ct.) Andover, Ashford, Bolton, Columbia, Coventry, Ellington, Hebron, Lebanon, Mansfield, Stafford, Union, Tolland, Vernon, Willington, Windham, and (in Mass.) Monson, Wales.

**Fall 2007**

**WILLIMANTIC RIVER ALLIANCE**

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