

NARROW RIVER NOTES

Narrow River Preservation Association: Preserving the Narrow River and the Watershed

Fall/Winter 2007

HAPPENINGS IN THE NARROW RIVER WATERSHED

At the Narrow River Preservation Association's (NRPA) annual meeting at the URI Bay Campus on October 2nd, a highlight was the set of presentations on current happenings in the Watershed by four representatives of other organizations that are deeply concerned about the Narrow River and its environment.

Lawrence Oliver, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, presented an update on the



Larry Oliver, Environmental Project Section Team Leader, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, speaking about the study of eel grass planting and River dredging, a study in process. (photo by R.D. Kenney)



Charles Vandemoer, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Refuge Manager, speaking about the Chafee Wildlife Refuge in the Narrow River Watershed. (photo by R.D. Kenney)

Corps' Narrow River Ecosystem Restoration Project. The Project Report and Environmental Assessment should be completed in the spring of 2008, about a year later than originally expected. The objective of the project is to improve water quality and restore lost salt marsh, eel grass, and shellfish habitat. (See the Spring 2007 issue of *Narrow River Notes* for more details about the

project).

Charles Vandemoer, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Refuge Manager, updated the meeting on happenings in the John H. Chafee National Wildlife Refuge at Pettaquamscutt Cove. The Rhode Island refuges had 465,000 visitors during the last year, with 24,000 at the Chafee Refuge. Their major management concern is the Salt-marsh Sharp-tailed Spar-

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Right to left: Annette DeSilva, NRPA Board Member, Richard Grant, NRPA President, Linda Green, Director of URI Watershed Watch program, & Elizabeth Herron, Program Coordinator, URI River Watch Program. (photo by R.D. Kenney)

OVERTURNING THE NARROW RIVER NOTES FROM A NEW NRPA BOARD MEMBER

There were email and phone messages! Something had happened on the Narrow River and it was worth calling in all the interested parties.

On Friday, October 12th, rowers from the URI Women's Crew noticed that the color of the water had changed in the Upper Pond and that it smelled bad—like rotten eggs. NRPA member Dick Lee noticed the changes on Saturday afternoon when he was boating. The message on Saturday night from the URI Watershed Watch coordinator was: "Go to your test stations and take samples of the River. Let us see if we can quantify this change."

On Sunday, water samples were taken at Lacey Bridge, and many other loca-

tions, and dropped off at Veronica Berounsky's home for transport to URI Watershed Watch for analysis. There was such excitement in the air. This natural phenomenon had not occurred since 1990. The deep pond at the north end of the River had turned over. This was an historic event!

On Monday Veronica needed help testing the Upper and Lower Pond. We set out from her dock near Lacey Bridge and motored to the site. It was my first time on the River and it was a perfect fall day—temperature in the 60's, blue sky with a few clouds, and a wind from the west.

As we approached Casey's Sill there was a noticeable change in the odor. It

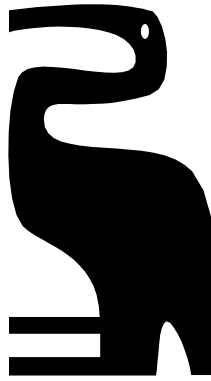
had a sulfur smell. The water changed from green to a cloudy yellow-brown. There were turkey vultures flying over us and an egret perched on a rock. A few dead fish could be seen on the shore. Although the edge of the River seemed

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The President's Cove



The 2008 NRPA membership drive has reached out to every resident in the Narrow River Watershed and to Friends of the Narrow River. We hope that, if you have not contributed to date, you will take a few minutes and send in your dues. If you can make a substantial contribution, it will be deeply appreciated.

While the first leg of the membership drive is complete, we need to raise the bar by getting more members. If you know of people who might contribute, we hope you'll pass this newsletter along and encourage others to become members. The money raised from the membership drive is a major support for our Water, Land, and Education programs.

A few of our recent accomplishments are mentioned below. As always, the volunteers in our River Watch program continue to provide accurate and thorough water-quality monitoring data to track the progress toward our goal of clean water.

Because of NRPA's initiative, the Army Corps of Engineers is studying the River for restoration of fish and wildlife habitats, such as salt marshes, eel grass beds, and mud flats. The dredging necessary for habitat restoration will have the side effect of improving channels for boaters.

Another significant contribution is our AWESome (Active Watershed Education) Program. This year we trained twenty four teachers in watershed science. They, along with the twenty eight teachers we trained the year before, are all now teaching the AWESome curriculum to hundreds of students in their classrooms. They're also using the Narrow River and the Watershed as a laboratory. This allows the students to learn in a hands-on way, so the lessons really sink in deeply.

The Town of Narragansett is in the process of expanding storm-water management to two additional sites in Edgewater and Pettaquamscutt Terrace, expanding on the successes of the systems installed at Circuit Drive and Mettatuxet Beach. Finally, every application submitted to CRMC for additional development in the Watershed is thoroughly reviewed by our Board of Directors.

NRPA has been and is doing a lot to maintain the quality of life in the Narrow River Watershed, but we need your help to continue running our programs at a high level of success. While many of us volunteer to make the programs work, we need your donation to help cover the costs. Your contribution helps to keep the Watershed a great place in which to live. We thank you in advance for your assistance.

—Richard Barker Grant



Rhode Island Rivers Council
Working together to protect and restore
Rhode Island's rivers and their watersheds

NRPA is proud to be a member of the Rhode Island Rivers Council.

MISSION STATEMENT

The Narrow River Preservation Association (NRPA) works to preserve, protect, and restore the natural environment and the quality of life of all communities within the Narrow (Pettaquamscutt) River Estuary and Watershed.

www.narrowriver.org

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NRPA is part of the United Way Workplace Campaign. This is our donor option number.

If you plan to make a United Way donation, please consider designating a portion of your gift to NRPA.

HAPPENINGS IN THE NARROW RIVER WATERSHED

(Continued from page 1)

row. A total of 40 nest sites were counted south of Middle Bridge. Charlie also talked about invasive species management, the proposed land swap for the Pastore Center property on Watchaug Pond in Charlestown, and the success at getting Narragansett to approve the no-wake zone for a second year.

Peggy O'Connor, the Executive Director of the Gilbert Stuart Birthplace and Museum talked about the programs and activities available at the Museum, and invited everybody to stop by. The Museum, the birthplace of one of America's foremost portrait painters, is site of the first snuff mill in America, fully restored and operational. There is also a partially restored grist mill, a fish ladder for watching the spring buckeye migration, and an expanding network of nature trails. (Visit www.gilbertstuartmuseum.com for more about what they offer.)

com for more about what they offer.)

Rob Leeson, long-time NRPA board member, talked about the Friends of Canonchet Farm, a new not-for-profit organization created in response to the recent proposal to convert woods and wetlands at the town-owned facility to a polo field. The mission of the Friends of Canonchet Farm is "to improve, manage, and preserve Canonchet Farm in partnership with the public for the enjoyment of present and future generations." Rob invited everyone to participate in their Sunday walks, about twice a month, usually at 1:00 PM. (For further information and the schedule, go to www.canonchet.org or call 401/783-3951.)

—Robert D. Kenney



Rob Leeson speaking about the Friends of Canonchet Farm, a not-for-profit organization that will work toward improving and designing the property in Narragansett and on the Narrow River. (photo by R.D. Kenney)



Peggy O'Connor, Executive Director of the Gilbert Stuart Museum. (photo by R.D. Kenney)



River Watch Ten Year Recognition Award recipients Ernest and Nancy Flewwellin and Jennifer Carey (left to right) stand with award presenter Annette DeSilva (far right). (photo by R.D. Kenney)



Richard Grant, NRPA President, presenting a gift of recognition for Rob Leeson's twenty years of volunteer service on the NRPA Board of Directors. (photo by R.D. Kenney)



Recipients of the NRPA Youth Environmental Recognition Award for volunteering at the Rivers' Council Environmental Day at the Beach, the Narrow River Road Race, or the Narrow River Turn Around Swim: (left to right) Elizabeth Lee, Marjorie Pickard, Abby Moylan, Catherine Alves, Franklin McCaffrey, and Emily Pietrzak. (photo by R.D. Kenney)

THANK YOU RIVER WATCH VOLUNTEERS!

NRPA extends a big thank you to the 2007 Narrow River volunteer monitors. Thirty-one people contributed their time and energy this year to collect water samples and make measurements. Their assistance and dedication is greatly appreciated.

The 2007 volunteers included: Dave Adelman, Veronica Berounsky, Bette Carey, Jennifer Carey, Deedee Chatham, Alison Chatham, Will Cumer, Pete Curtis, Annette DeSilva, Ernest Flewwellin,



Nancy Flewwellin, Jessica Greer, Debbie Kaprielian, Ken Kaprielian, Jeff Kaprielian, Neil Kelly, Marc Lamson, Dorothy Mann, Dudley Mann, Barry Martasian, Ken McShane, Judith Paolucci, Harriet Powell, Dana Sarubbi, Carol Sarubbi, Robert Schelleng, Laura Sisson, Sandra Skaradowski, Rosemary Smith, Evan Sylvia, and Sue Van Ness.

Thank you very much!

—Annette DeSilva

OVERTURNING THE RIVER

(Continued from page 1)

quiet and peaceful, there were many changes in the River, and we were here to record them.

Veronica and I recorded the water temperature, dissolved oxygen, and salinity at three locations: two at Upper Pond and one in the Lower Pond. We collected data from a half-meter deep and every meter down to seven meters at each site. In addition, Veronica measured water clarity with a Secchi disc.

Each day she hopes to collect data to see how Narrow River adjusts to this phenomenon and how it returns to normal. All of these numbers are telling us a story about what is happening in the water.

As we motored back to her dock, we talked about what conditions make this happen—a long, dry summer, tides, changes of temperature from summer to autumn weather, changes in salinity in the water. Everything has to be just right for this event to happen.

Why and how does it happen? These are good questions. See the article to the right of this column for answers.

What a wonderful initiation for this new board member to the NRPA!

—Rosemary C. Smith



HOW DOES IT HAPPEN?

Overturning of a water body is a relatively common process. Simplified, there are two layers of water present. The upper layer is less dense than the lower layer, mostly because it is warmer. How different the two density values are determines how resistant they are to mixing across the boundary between them.

In typical water bodies, they turn over every fall as the upper layer cools. In the Narrow River, the Upper Pond is very deep and isolated upstream of a shallow sill, and the density difference between the upper and lower layers is large enough that they mix only on rare occasions. Since the bottom layer is not in contact with the air, organisms use up all the oxygen present, causing the anoxic (low oxygen) conditions and high hydrogen sulfide levels.

If conditions conspire just right, then the density of the upper layer can be increased. Reduced freshwater input because of low rainfall over the summer will increase density (saltier = denser), as will a quick decline in water temperature caused by the week of chilly nights before the overturn (colder = denser). Once the densities of the two layers get similar enough, then some physical input like blustery winds can “stir the pot” and cause the overturn.

—Robert D. Kenney

NRPA SCHOLARSHIP RENAMED

Since 1993, NRPA has awarded \$500.00 scholarships to seniors graduating from high schools in the Watershed as part of our Youth Environmental Education Program. NRPA is pleased to announce that the scholarship has been renamed the Lesa Meng / Narrow River Preservation Association Scholarship in honor of a former Board member. Ms. Meng was a Board member for six years and chair of the Narrow River Road Race during that time. Her husband, Ron Moffett, has provided funding for the scholarship, enabling NRPA to award \$1000.00 scholarships in 2008.

The scholarship applications are judged on the following: the student’s environmentally oriented activities in and out of high school; the quality of an original essay on the theme “Choose one environmental problem/issue relevant to the Narrow River and discuss what you as an individual could do to mitigate the problem;” a science teacher’s recommendation; and academic achievement in math and science courses.

Applications are available from the Guidance Departments at Narragansett High School, North Kingstown High School, and South Kingstown High School (generally after the February school break), and from the NRPA web site. Applications are due April 7, 2008.

—Melissa Hughes



A HOUSE ON THE RIVER

I can't sum up more than thirty summers in our small and simple retreat on Narrow River. But I can come up with a few glimpses and glances.

The very first property I ever purchased entirely on my own was this place on Harcourt Avenue. I kept an aluminum skiff and a canoe at the beachfront wall just down the street. At the other end of Harcourt, that reassuring relic from the time of Roger Williams—Treaty Rock—looms, but just a little, a minor challenge of a stroll and a climb and the omnipresent ticks.

We had to put in an outdoor shower and an indoor sink and faucet. I also added a wood-burning parlor stove for chilly or rainy evenings. But the special treats were the golden toad often under the shower with me, the hummingbirds that regularly came to the wild bee-balm, and the sweet perfume of honeysuckle over the front portal.

Ah yes, the weather-beaten shingled cottage, with a tiny loft, looked like a sketch on a greeting card. My wife and I raised three children in such tiny quarters—at least through summer.

I recently discovered that Yehudi Menuhin, the great virtuoso violinist who stunned his debut audience at Carnegie Hall, used the money he earned in New York to buy his first property in America—right here in Narragansett!

Narrow River narrates a wonderful, flowing tale of the lives of those of us who have chosen to dwell by its banks. We watch the herons and egrets, the gulls and the swallows, and also worry about the natural forces that try to swallow up our small cottages and bungalows, before the advent of the larger and more permanent “developments.” Squirrels chew and gnaw at my outbuildings and bird-houses.

My neighbor claims an early spring bear grabbed my bird-feeder, gulped its contents, and flung it into the bushes. (She and a friend found it and restored it and put it properly back.) The chipmunks and the ants, the mice and the deer, the geese and even the pine-cones from the ever-growing evergreens join the attack on our wee abode—especially while we're away in the city.

Nevertheless it stands. My wife goes at her garden with rake and hoe, mower



and hose. I row behind the Gilbert Stuart Birthplace as a gesture of belonging to the spot where American art was born. I take my dip at the dunes, at the mouth of the River that faces England, from which our language, and my grandfather into the bargain, were born.

I am, after all, an English teacher. I read my Thoreau here in my house, to prepare for classes when summer is, alas, closing; but I have read the entirety of *Walden* aloud to my son when his English teacher chose it for a summer assignment. I read to him while we were lying down on our cots.

I have always thought the best exercise machine in July and August is the common hammock. Just swing back and forth a few times, that's all you need to stay in shape.

Our culture emphasizes the virtues of work, drive, and quest. Narrow River counters those values with lazier, or more contemplative, pursuits—drifting with the tides, letting the clouds sail by, floating, and sipping the sugar from that bee-balm, sharing its sweetness with those ruby-throats—as time goes by. My parents had their riverfront residence on Riverside Drive before I established my own home here. There's not much difference between a bird's nest and a person's address. The only permanence is ... perhaps ... memory?

—Mike Fink, Middlebridge

GLOBAL WARMING AND THE NARROW RIVER

My house fronts the Narrow River—giving me a unique perspective. Twenty-two years ago (when I moved here) we dug soft shell clams and clammed for quahogs that we would eat raw, delighting in the ability to have them so fresh. We had a natural little sand beach where my young grandchildren could splash, try to swim, and build sand castles.

Two years later, the Department of Environmental Management (DEM) said that the water was no longer safe for swimming and that eating shellfish of any kind could result in serious illness, but we could still boat and kayak. In our attempt to protect the River we moved our boat to a marina on Salt Pond where they could change the oil and care for the maintenance in a responsible manner.

Now the little beach is gone. Why? The River has risen almost a foot in the past seventy-five years. This also means my property has lost 180 square feet of land. Speaking to a scientist, I learned that the River perhaps could rise about three feet by the year 2050 and probably would rise by that amount by 2100.

Some of you who use a motorboat might revel in the fact that you might not go aground as often, but think again. Maybe the sandy bottom of the River will end up clogged with more sand, growing plants, and debris. Many thought the River would cleanse itself with the joining of South Kingstown to Narragansett with the new Middle Bridge, yet the same scientist I spoke to was one of the knowledgeable people who voiced his opinion that this might not happen.

Not only are the southern shores of our state in danger, but so, too, is our beloved Narrow River. Wake up! Start doing something to help the River and the Planet.

—Rose Epstein



TO ALL WHO RESPONDED TO OUR 2007—2008 ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP DRIVE: THANK YOU!

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Henry Spencer

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A SOUTH COUNTY GHOST STORY

Part I of a II Part Series

I have been an Episcopal priest for nearly half a century and so, of course, am familiar with the old Scottish litany that ran “from ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggedy beasties and things that go bump in the night,” to which the congregation gave a hearty response, “Good Lord deliver us.” Being a modern, I was not bothered by ghoulies and ghosties, nor long-leggedy beasties, although occasionally I have been bothered by things that go bump in the night, whatever they may be. But one night, in May of ’85, I met some very nice ghosts: spirits of good river people I once knew, and there may have been some ghoulies around at the time. So now I believe.

It was near four in the afternoon when I pushed through Kingston on 138 headed for my home in Saunderstown. My big wagon was loaded down flat with summer things: kitchenware, every type of clothes, foul weather gear to match, boat stuff, four sets of telephones, office equipment, guns, and three large dogs. For six months I had been in my winter house in the Valley of Virginia, near the hunt country and the Blue Ridge Mountains. Now my spring migration was complete. After a check at Kingston, the light flashed green and I put the throttle down for a sprint to the Bay.

The Tower Hill Road light was red, and I was glad for a moment’s pause to feel and savor the signs of my homecoming. As I crossed the road, the air changed as though a window had been opened, bringing a breath of the sea mixed with bayberry, green fields, tar, hemp, kelp, eel grass, fish, salt, and ships. I was home.

I let the big diesel idle down the hill, and coasted around the corner by the old Yeomans’ place. The ancient farmhouse nestled to the left behind a tumbled stone wall, broody hen mother to countless out-buildings—dog houses, cages, hen house, privy, smokehouse, woodshed, and a tiny cow barn. All were the same as I remembered them over half a century past when I first drove my mother down a single-track dirt road over a wooden bridge past a small sign that read “eggs,” “soft crabs,” or “buckies” if the season were right. The road turned right in those days and ran along the River past the old Glebe to McSparran’s Hill. The cut for 138 didn’t come until years later.



Mrs. Yeomans worked days for my mother. She was a big angular woman—calloused and rough. She wore no makeup to hide her weathered, speckled face. Her hair was pulled back to a small, tight bun. When she spoke, the words came through a grating of missing teeth. She worked through our house with broom and mop, but when time came for the kitchen, she scoured the floor on her hands and knees. She wore canvas sneakers to work, usually with a toe out. At home her feet were bare.

I saw her standing in the door at the back of the house across from the sign that read “eggs.” Mother always took time to pass the time of day before getting down to business, whatever it was—work, cleaning, eggs, or crabs. Mother asked after Joe or Molle. I did not know who they were at the time. I usually climbed out of the Model T. I heard my mother’s voice ask after Joe. Mrs. Yeomans spoke an ancestral dialect that was hard to understand.

“Joe be at war.”

I didn’t know of any war, and I was sure Joe wouldn’t have gone even if there had been one. Mother explained later that Joe had gone to work putting hard crabs in a mud-filled car to force peeling. The exact process was a close-kept Yeomans secret, peelers being worth more than hard crabs by ten to one.

In April we bought “buckies” for fifty cents a stick, which held maybe

two dozen fish strung through the eyes—smoked fresh from the River in the shed out back. I wandered past the smokehouse, chicken house, and woodshed to the myriad cages that stood in a rambling line back of the main building. Some house broody hens, or ducks, but others were unique to the Yeomans place. Always a pet coon. Always a crow or two that spoke. Sometimes rabbits, and always a couple of dogs that had hound ancestry mixed with some unknown bar sinister. I was contemplating an enormous coon when I heard a scrap of conversation.

“Tell the boy don’t mess with the coon. He be bit for sure. Phoebe ain’t no lady kitten. She be mean.”

Sometimes Mother asked after Molle. I heard later that Molle was the high flyer of the Yeomans family. She had a good voice and one time worked with a sort of World War I USO to entertain the garrison at Fort Kearney years back.

Mrs. Yeomans always stood in the doorway, and she filled the space so I couldn’t see inside. But a view of the outside told plenty. The Yeomans’ farm hadn’t changed since the house was first built—nearer two centuries ago than one. No water, no central heat, no plumbing. Oil lamps, wood stove, and outhouse took care of their needs. The Yeomans had their money from the River, and they made their food from the farm. They couldn’t read or write so they had precious little book learning, but they were independent and free.

[To be continued in the Spring 2008 edition of Narrow River Notes.]

—Shane Saunderstown

[Editor’s Note: This story is about the house at 235 Bridgetown Road, near Lacey Bridge (sometimes called the “hermit house”). “Shane Saunderstown” was a pen name used by the late Rev. Francis Bayard Rhein, an Episcopal priest and theology professor who summured in a house that his parents built on Waterway Drive in Saunderstown. The story was sent to us by Betty Sheldon Aschman, who grew up next door to Rev. Rhein, and now lives right around the corner from “the old Yeomans’ place” on Walmsley Lane.]

WANTED: A FEW GOOD WRITERS

Help me to make *Narrow River Notes* your newsletter. Do you have a short poem with a river or environmental theme? How about an article on local history, like the John Elder Dick pieces that we've re-printed? Have you taken a good photograph in the Watershed? Do you have a question about anything in the



Watershed that one of our Board members might answer? Or do you just have an opinion you'd like to express?

I promise to consider any and all submissions. We publish three issues per year—spring, summer, and fall/winter—with the respective deadlines at the beginning of March, July, and November. Send submissions or questions to me at NRPA.Notes@verizon.net.

—Robert D. Kenney, Editor

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