

TRANSCRIPT BULLETIN

The color of water

History and environment blend into symposium

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Dedham community members gathered at the Dedham Historical Society & Museum to learn more about the vital roles the Charles River, Neponset River and Mother Brook Canal play in Dedham.

The sold-out symposium was held on Saturday, May 4, and featured many speakers, including MIT Professor Leigh Hafrey, Judy Neiswander of the Dedham Historical Society, along with Tom Palmer and Taylor Walter of the Neponset River Watershed Association, Tabitha Maccalous of the Dedham/Westwood Water District, students from Noble and Greenough School, Jon Briggs of the Dedham Water Trail, and Benjamin Swanson from L.L. Bean.

Refreshments and snacks were provided by local Dedham businesses.

Hafrey, who served as moderator, was inspired to hold this symposium last year when he was out paddling on the Charles River by himself. Hafrey believes that not many community members are aware of the history and importance of Dedham's water.

"Looking forward, we need to preserve what we have in this town," he said. "Climate change is a big piece of the puzzle as Dedham moves forward in protecting our bodies of water."

Hafrey explained that roughly 20 percent of Dedham is flowing water or wetlands. Hafrey has been helping document Dedham's wetlands for many years now with photographs and videos.

Neiswander said that "Dedham was born in water." When the English settlers came to Dedham in the early 1600s, they could explore the town only via waterways, since it was too risky to walk around the woods. Neiswander also stated that the Mother Brook canal (which connects the Charles and Neponset rivers) was dug in 1639, making it the USA's first man-made canal. The early settlers were in desperate need of a mill, so they needed water power. The canal was dug with wooden shovels since they didn't have iron.

Neiswander showed the audience a map of Dedham from the 1700s, which depicted the amount of mills along the canal.

“Mother Brook is the industrial heart of this town,” she said. The mills produced a variety of goods, including wire, copper cents, carpets, envelopes and handkerchiefs.

Today, Mother Brook is part of a flood-control system that diverts water from the Charles River to the Neponset River. The brook's flow is under the control of the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, and is used for flood control on the Charles. There are three remaining dams on the stream, plus a movable floodgate that controls flow from the Charles into Mother Brook.

Palmer, of the Neponset River Watershed Association, said that their group is a “voice for water.” The goals of the Neponset River Watershed Association include stopping water pollution, preventing water waste, educating the public, opening up recreational opportunities, and restoring fish and wildlife habitats. Today, Palmer and other members of the Neponset River Watershed Association sample water from different parts of Mother Brook.

By the mid-20th century, after more than 300 years of industrial use, the Mother Brook was intensely polluted. Gasoline, PCPs and raw sewage had been dumped into the brook over the years. An oil spill of 1,300 gallons was discovered near Milton Street in 1975, and gasoline was discovered bubbling into the brook in 1990. L. E. Mason Co. was heavily fined by the Environmental Protection Agency for dumping trichloroethylene into the brook from 1986 to 1994. The company was also known to dump zinc, fats, oils and greases into the canal.

On its website, the Dedham Historical Society explained the vital role the Charles River has played in Dedham’s past and present: “Once a haven for residents seeking respite from the city and a major source of recreation, the Charles River later became heavily polluted as a result of urbanization. Since the EPA launched its Charles River Cleanup in 1995, the river has come back as a place for recreational activity: in the past few years, Dedham has built three public canoe launches and created a 6.5-mile Water Trail, partnering with L.L Bean to get residents out on the water.”

The presentations were followed by a guided tour of the Charles River in Dedham with L.L. Bean.

The Sustainability Advisory Committee encourages Dedham residents and community members to visit these locations for historic and current photos of water in Dedham. The exhibits are now up and will remain until mid-May: Dedham Historical Society & Museum, 612 High St.; Dedham