



PLACE

Fall/Winter 2025

Brookline GreenSpace Alliance
is a non-profit membership organization
dedicated to the enhancement of open
space in Brookline by supporting citizens
in caring for their green spaces.

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Cover photo: Muddy River, John Shreffler

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Hall's Pond: Fifty Years of Still Water and Strong Will

For the Friends of Hall's Pond – 50th Anniversary of the Hall's Pond Sanctuary

Erin Chute, Brookline Commissioner of Public Works

Not big, not loud—just humble and still,
Tucked near the courts, at the base of the hill,
Where willows lean low and the breezes are kind,
A soft green escape from the world left behind.

Yet long before then—before streets had a name,
When the land breathed quiet and no fences came—
It started, of course, as a cedar swamp land,
With peat underfoot and no human hand.

Where herons would visit, and frogs used to hum—
And silence was part of the pond's native drum.
Then time marched along, as it always will do,
And city life crept where the wild once grew.

But Minna Hall saw it through different eyes—
She watched birds in flight cross the gray Boston skies.
She rallied with women in hats stitched with care,
To save the wild birds from hatpins and flair.

They launched a movement...fearless...refined,
To save birds from fashion and humankind.
She dreamed of a future where birds would still sing,
And left us this refuge, this wild offering.

As cities grew denser, and roadways were laid,
Stormwater rushed where the cattails once swayed.
The pond slowly shrank, and the edges grew bare—
It needed a champion. It needed repair.

In the 1970s, some neighbors took note,
And raised their concerns, their shovels, and vote.
The Town bought the land—yes, with passionate clout—
And the Friends of Hall's Pond soon started to sprout.

They weren't seeking glory, just balance and peace,
A space for the bird song; where the traffic might cease.
They raked, and they rallied, with no time to rest,
Fueled by one quiet truth: this pond is our best.

But then came the skeptics—the doubters, the flak—
Who claimed, "It's a swamp! We don't want it back!"
But restoring a pond takes political flair,
And meetings, and memos, and fighting for air.

So back to the drawing board—with stakes raised anew,
A plan to restore Hall's Pond began to take view.
The drainage improved, the storm flows subdued,
And the pond breathed again—revived and renewed.

They united the woods and the pond as one whole,
So walkers and birds could both reach their goal.
A sanctuary stitched from old roots and new beams,
Connected by vision, sweat equity, dreams.

The boardwalk was anchored with helical piers,
A feat that took vision—and quite a few years.
And by 2002, the great work was done—
A wild was reclaimed, and a new age begun.



DPW Commissioner Erin Chute reading this poem at the Hall's Pond 50th Anniversary Celebration, June 22, 2025. Photo by Fran Perler

President's Message

In July, my colleagues and I at the Brookline GreenSpace Alliance received the sad news that Betsy Shure Gross had passed away at her home in Davis, California. On October 20, Betsy Shure Gross's ashes were interred on a beautiful hillside at Brookline's Walnut Hills Cemetery.

For decades, Betsy was one of Brookline's most prominent advocates for nature, the environment, and historic landscapes. We mourn her passing, but we also remember her achievements.

Along with Arlene Mattison, Betsy founded the Friends of Leverett Pond and initiated the process of transforming the then-neglected Olmsted Park into one of Brookline's best-loved and most beautiful green spaces. She inspired her High Street Hill neighbors to clean up the park and lobbied for public investment that ensured that Olmsted Park would be enjoyed by all.

Betsy's advocacy for Olmsted's Emerald Necklace included her leadership in initiating the Muddy River Restoration Project, which ultimately invested over \$90 million in landscape restoration and flood control in a string of linear parks running from Leverett Pond to the Charles River.

Betsy also was a leading advocate of restoring and reopening the Carlton Street footbridge. She played a pivotal role in ensuring that Brookline would meet its obligations to restore the bridge as part of its contribution to the Muddy River Restoration Project. I recall sitting at the table in Betsy's house to hammer out the language of the motion that Town Meeting overwhelmingly approved in 2009 to appropriate funds for the footbridge.

The Hall's Pond Sanctuary was especially important to Betsy, who was a member of the Friends of Hall's Pond from the start, later serving on its Board and then as co-president. At the June 2025 celebration of the 50th anniversary of the sanctuary, State Representative Tommy Vitolo spoke and recalled Betsy's vital role in protecting and caring for Hall's Pond. Betsy was unable to attend the anniversary celebration, but she was delighted when Commissioner of Public Works Erin Chute called her and read the poem that Erin had written for the occasion—a poem that appears in this issue of PLACE.

Betsy's influence extended well beyond Brookline. Betsy was a key part of the movement to rediscover and restore Olmsted's parks across America. In 1980 she helped found the National Association for Olmsted Parks—now the Olmsted Network—and later served as co-chair of that organization. This October, Betsy posthumously received the Olmsted Network's most prestigious honor, the Caroline Loughlin Volunteer Service Award.

At the state level, Betsy worked in the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs and was executive director for its Office of Public-Private Partnerships. She helped launch the Historic Parkways Preservation Initiative. Betsy was a prime mover behind the Community Preservation Act (CPA), which Brookline eventually voted to accept. She closely followed how Brookline was using CPA funds to preserve and protect open space.

Betsy's legacy is much more than the sum of her achievements. Those of us who knew her will remember her tenacious advocacy, incredible energy, and absolute dedication to the cause of protecting and preserving green space. For Betsy doing the right thing was never optional; it was always essential. She was not just a force of nature; she was a force for nature. Her intense determination and passion for parks and open space will continue to inspire us.

Sean Lynn-Jones

Sean Lynn-Jones is president of BGSA



Betsy Shure Gross at Hall's Pond Nature Sanctuary in North Brookline in 1998. Photo by Pat Greenhouse, Globe Staff.

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Restoring the Muddy River: Brookline has a vital role to play

Emily Norton, Executive Director, Charles River Watershed Association

On a sweltering hot day, the Emerald Necklace offers an oasis from the hustle and bustle of urban life. Mature trees, picturesque gardens, walking paths, and the meandering Muddy River provide urban dwellers with a respite, a moment for quiet reflection, or a spot for a shaded walk or jog.

Too often, however, a walk or rest along the Muddy can be interrupted by the smell of sewage, or the sight of toilet paper clinging to low branches.

Each year the Charles River Watershed Association (CRWA) works with the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to grade the Charles River and its tributary streams. The Lower Basin of the Charles received a D in 1995, but today receives B- to B+ grades - the river has come a long way since the 1960s when the Standells sang about its “Dirty Water.” In contrast, the Muddy still receives Cs or Ds each year, and it is the most polluted above-ground tributary to the Charles River. The low grades for the Muddy River reflect excessive levels of *E. coli* bacteria, which is present in sewage, as well as phosphorous from fertilizer and stormwater runoff.

In recent years, the US Army Corps of Engineers’ Muddy River Restoration Project daylighted buried sections, dredged ponds and channels, and replanted banks. Flooding risks have been reduced, and habitats are improving. But the project did not adequately address a major problem still facing the Muddy: its water quality.

Why is the Muddy so polluted?

First, some context. Prior to European colonization, the Muddy River was a tidal waterway that flowed through a hundred acres of marshland. The filling in of Back Bay, an increasing population, and rudimentary sanitation practices meant that by the mid-1800s, the Muddy River area was “the filthiest marsh and mud flats to be found anywhere in the State of Massachusetts.” Olmsted’s Emerald Necklace redesign did much to address the chronic sewage buildup, but continued urbanization, the damming of the Charles, and burying streams like Stony Brook, Tannery Brook, and Village Brook underground further degraded the river.

Today, the Muddy River watershed encompasses about six square miles of land from the Chestnut Hill Reservoir to the Bowker Overpass, and 60% of the land is within the Town of Brookline. Impervious surfaces cover 44% of the Muddy River watershed land, meaning it is covered by roads, sidewalks, buildings, or other structures rather than natural ground cover. As a rule of thumb, watershed imperviousness at levels as low as 10% can negatively impact water quality and river health.

The Muddy River’s low grades are due to extremely high levels of *E. coli* bacteria, which CRWA has sampled consistently in the Muddy River since the early 2000s. *E. coli* bacteria are indicators of fecal contamination, and their presence indicates that interaction with the water can cause harmful health effects. Another major concern in the Muddy River is high levels of phosphorus, the limiting nutrient in freshwater bodies. Waterways with high nutrient levels disrupt the balance of aquatic ecosystems, leading to algal blooms, invasive plant growth, oxygen depletion, and die-off of aquatic life.

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The primary sources of pollution to the Muddy River are:

1. **Stormwater runoff:** Every time it rains, rainfall runoff (i.e. stormwater) carries pollution on paved surfaces (gasoline, oil, pet waste, fertilizer, etc.) into storm drains, which lead directly into the Muddy River, with no treatment or filtering.
2. **Illegal connections:** Periodically the Town of Brookline finds that a private sewer pipe from a building has been connected unlawfully to the stormwater drainage pipe, rather than to the sewer pipe system, so every shower or toilet flush into that pipe carries wastewater directly into the Muddy River.
3. **Deteriorated outdated underground pipes:** There are miles of stormwater pipes under our feet, so that the streets don’t flood during every storm. There are also miles of sewer pipes, carrying wastewater from sinks, showers, and toilets to the Deer Island Wastewater Treatment Plant. Many of these pipes are decades-old and broken, so sewage leaks into broken stormwater pipes which then discharge into the Muddy River. In certain spots in the neighboring Stony Brook watershed in Boston, stormwater and sewage are combined into one pipe (combined sewer system), and an outlet into the Muddy River from the underground Stony Brook can discharge untreated sewage directly to the Back Bay Fens during heavy storms when the pipes reach capacity.

What Can be Done?

The mission of the CRWA is to protect, restore, and enhance the Charles River and its watershed lands—and that includes the Muddy River watershed. The goal is simple but ambitious: to restore the Muddy River to “Class B” water quality — a state standard that means it is safe for fish, wildlife, and recreation.

For this reason, in 2023 CRWA launched a Muddy River watershed visioning process, with support from a generous anonymous foundation grant and in partnership with Emerald Necklace Conservancy.

Through a community-focused process including webinars, focus groups, surveys, site visits, and workshops, we have identified numerous options for significantly reducing pollution in the Muddy River, with wide ranges in cost, scale, and “co-benefits” such as reducing flooding, mitigating extreme heat, and increasing habitat and biodiversity. The top solutions include:

- Fixing leaking sewer pipes and eliminating illicit sewer connections.
- Reducing polluted runoff through rain gardens, vegetated areas called bioswales, and permeable pavement which infiltrates rainwater into the ground rather than diverting it to storm drains.
- Converting existing green spaces into ecological parks, with native plantings, pollinator gardens, and wetland vegetation.
- Converting portions of existing open water (such as Leverett Pond) into engineered wetlands, which act as a natural pollution filter, restoring a small amount of the wetlands dominant in this region for thousands of years prior to development.

Climate change makes this work more urgent. Heavier rains mean higher flood risks. Hotter summers put stress on fish and wildlife and increase the public health risks of bacteria in the water; the Muddy experienced a cyanobacteria bloom for much of August and into September of 2025. By investing in ecological restoration now, Brookline can make its neighborhoods more resilient while also investing in a beloved greenspace.

We have had the great privilege of partnering with Brookline GreenSpace Alliance through the visioning process, including presenting at the Brookline GreenSpace

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Map showing the Muddy River watershed outlined in green



Mock up of Leverett Pond as an engineered wetland.



Brookline Greenspaces:
top to bottom
Carlton Street Footbridge
Longwood Mall
Griggs Park
Olmsted Park
Photos by John Shreffler

Nature: The Constant in Brookline's Busy Streets

Jenette Restivo

Brookline consistently ranks as one of the best places to live in America. With its excellent schools, safe streets, numerous restaurants, high walkability, public transportation, and proximity to Boston, residents are never surprised by the recognition.

But Brookline is not just popular with human residents. Amid the urban energy of the town, wild critters call Brookline home, too. Red-tailed hawks soar overhead, bunnies dart across lawns, herons wade in the Muddy River, coyotes skittishly run by, and turkeys boldly chase pedestrians down Beacon Street. From the Emerald Necklace and Larz Anderson Park to small pollinator gardens tucked in quiet corners, Brookline's tree-lined streets and green spaces thread our neighborhoods with life.

For these critters (and for me) Brookline's green spaces are the town's biggest draw. These green spaces offer a chance to access and connect with nature. I find that green spaces are vital places to escape into the realm of nature, tune into the busy world of birds, admire the resilience of city trees, and feel grounded.

Why do green spaces matter in an urban place like Brookline? Besides beautifying our town, nature plays a vital role in keeping our environment healthy. Trees and plants absorb carbon dioxide, release oxygen, reduce flooding, and keep temperatures (and us) cooler. Green spaces support the birds, insects, and mammals that make our neighborhoods livelier, pollinate plants, and contribute to biodiversity, which is a sign of a healthy ecosystem.

A growing body of research has found that nature exposure has a positive impact on various aspects of human health, including mental, physical, and cognitive well-being. Decades of research show that even brief exposure to green spaces helps people think clearer, heal faster, and feel calmer.

At the same time that we're learning more about the benefits of nature for us, our kids are becoming more plugged in to screens than ever. Even during recess, a phone can be more popular than a field of grass or a puddle. I like the saying: let's raise children who know the names of trees and animals, not celebrities or brands. If kids looked up from their devices, they might discover that the natural world is more fascinating than TikTok.

So how can families help kids reconnect with the wild world right outside their doors? The good news is that it doesn't take a trip to the Berkshires or the White Mountains—it just takes curiosity and the mindset that being outdoors isn't a means to an end, but an end in itself. Start by taking a "city safari" walk around your block or through a local park, looking and listening for birds, bugs, squirrels, bunnies, or nests.

A practice often used in nature-based schools is encouraging children to choose a "sit spot" outdoors. This is somewhere they feel comfortable and can return to regularly to tune into the natural world. They can jot down notes or sketch what they see in a small nature notebook. One of my favorite activities is to "adopt" a local tree. A child can pick a tree they see every day—maybe in their yard, on the street, or in a nearby park—and visit it each week to observe which critters rely on it and how it changes with the seasons. Older kids can use field guides or apps on their phones to identify the trees along their street or the birds visiting a feeder they've stocked with seed.

Brookline families are lucky to have so many places to explore nature together. There's so much to discover at Larz Anderson Park, Hall's Pond, or along the Muddy River. I've never left one of these beautiful spaces disappointed. (The photo library on my iPhone can attest to that!) Brookline Recreation also offers excellent family nature walks and seasonal programs, but some of the best discoveries happen on your own. The goal isn't to complete a checklist. It's to slow down, look closely, and rediscover how alive our town really is.

That's the heart of my upcoming book, *City Safari* (on bookshelves on October 21st). It invites middle-years readers to explore the hidden wild world of cities: urban forests, gardens, and the critters who call our streets home. At a time when nature is needed more than ever, it's important that children understand that you don't need to be in the middle of a national park to find nature. You don't have to leave your hometown to see how vibrant, complex, and essential nature is.

In Brookline, where housing, schools, bike lanes, streets, or businesses compete for every square foot of space, green space is the one use that benefits everyone. By exploring and noticing these spaces, we not only appreciate their beauty and importance, but we can also learn how to better care for them and be better stewards of these vital parts of our town.

Restoring the Muddy River (concluded):

Alliance annual meeting in May 2024. It has been exciting to see community members offer so much interest and enthusiasm from so many for these ideas, but it will be vital that there be even more support in order to garner the necessary political will – and dollars – to move these projects forward. The Town of Brookline has already strengthened its stormwater bylaws and ramped up the pace of their illicit discharge detection and elimination (IDDE) schedule to reduce the amount of sewage entering the Muddy River from leaky pipes and illicit connections, and for this we applaud them.

The City of Boston and the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) also have important roles to play when it comes to restoring the Muddy River, and they are deeply engaged in the visioning process as well.

Momentum is building. With the completion of major Army Corps work, attention is turning to the Muddy River's deplorable water quality. State and private funding opportunities are opening up for green infrastructure and climate resilience. Residents and local organizations are engaged and eager to help. This is the moment to act.

Brookline's destiny has long been linked with the Muddy River. In fact, prior to its incorporation in 1705 as an independent town, Brookline was known as the "hamlet of Muddy River." The degradation of the Muddy River has occurred over centuries, and restoration will not happen overnight. But just as "the best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago, the next best time is today," so it goes with investing in restoring the Muddy River.

To learn more and get involved, visit crra.org/muddy

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Get Involved

Have an idea for a park project?
Opportunities exist to improve
your neighborhood park. Do
you have the approval of the
Director of the Parks and Open
Space Division?
Apply for a small grant from the
Brookline GreenSpace Alliance.
More information at
brooklinegreenspace.org.

Support the Alliance



Erin Chute's Hall's Pond Poem (concluded)

From Barbara to Betsy, from Lee to the rest,
They gave it their all, and gave it their best.
They honored Miss Albrecht with granite and wings,
A stone angel now watches over seasons and springs.

And fifty years on, what a legacy made:
I've seen children laugh in the willow's green shade.
I've seen lovers strolling and elders at rest,
And one nervous young man, on bended knee, in a tie and a vest.

I've seen people gather in joy, others mourn in sorrow,
Grieving a loved one, unsure of tomorrow.
I've watched someone practice an aria low,
Letting their voice match the breeze as it blows.

Some sit and reflect, while the woodpeckers tap,
And the sounds of the city fall gently to nap.
This place is a balm, a quiet embrace—
A jewel of reflection, a soulful green space.

It's more than a wetland—it's memory and place,
It's healing and heritage, community grace.
A place to reflect, to restore, to belong—
A space where the birds can still sing a song.

And the Friends? Oh, the Friends—you magnificent crew,
With the grit of New England and hearts that are true.
You're the reason this place is still whole.
You rake, and you weed, and you reach for the soul.

You educate neighbors and fundraise with grace,
You care for this pond like a cherished green space.
You've welcomed young students and watched nesting birds—
You've tended with action far louder than words.

So instead of a toast, I offer this rhyme,
To honor your labor, your hearts, and your time.
Let's lift up this space with each step that we take—
It's sacred because of the difference you make.