HOUSATONIC GREENWAY
Introduction

For millennia the Berkshire Hills lay buried beneath four successive glaciations until, about 12,000 years ago, the remnants of the last three-mile-thick Wisconsin ice sheet melted away down the Hoosic and Housatonic Rivers. In the new sunshine the frigid waters of the released Housatonic glistened like a ribbon winding through a bleak Arctic tundra, separating the eroded Taconics on the west from the scoured barrier mountains to the east.

After gathering an east branch from Dalton and a west branch from Richmond, with middle branches from Onota and Pontoosuc Lakes in Pittsfield, the river, turbulent or placid by turns, measures 40 bee-line miles to its juncture with the Konkapot at the Old Colony line. It covers twice that distance, as the canoeist paddles the meanders in Lenox and Lee, follows the great westward bend in Stockbridge, and rounds the oxbows of the Sheffield Plain; thence it runs southward 100 miles through Connecticut's western hills to Long Island Sound.

The Greenway of the Upper Housatonic was gradually carpeted with mosses, lichens, grasses and sedges, sphagnum in the kettles, rock tripe on the erratic boulders and reindeer moss on the ledges. It was a tundra awaiting flora and fauna as the climate warmed.

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During the summer of 1982 this columnist shared the excitement of picking white spruce cones and pieces of ivory, tooth and bone of a mastodon from an ancient peat bog in South Egremont a few miles from the Housatonic. These first Berkshire fossils radio-carbon-dated 11,500 years ago. They showed that the Housatonic Greenway was clothed with a dark boreal forest of white spruce, inhabited by late

Pleistocene animals such as wooly mammoth, sabre-toothed tiger, giant beaver and caribou, down to mouse and bumblebee-sized pygmy shrew, which I have seen skitter across a deep puddle. Pollen samples from the same bog show that flowers, too, had come into the Greenway, and this Garden of Eden was now ready for human occupation.

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Ten thousand years ago, which is to say 8000 B.C., small hunting bands of Paleo-Indians entered the scene, as evidenced by a few diagnostic fluted spear points found in the Greenway from Bartholomew's Cobble to Stockbridge Bowl. Five other successive, distinct Indian cultures from Early Archaic to Late Woodland can be identified from points, artifacts, and stone-bowl and ceramic shards still found in plowed fields, at rock shelters, along streams and by eroding pond shores.

Indian population in Berkshire County probably never reached 5000; and by the time when missionary John Sergeant instructed Konkapot and Umpachene in the 1730s, it had dwindled to fewer than 300. One of these last Mohicans was Joe Pye, whose name is forever commemorated by the tall, purple wildflower growing by the Housatonic. Over their long tenure the Indians never changed nor harmed the river, nor did they understand ownership of the land or any written language. This was the end of the prehistoric period.

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More than a century of colonial settlement ensued, beginning with the adventuresome Dutch tenant farmers from the Hudson Valley, who came to Mount Washington (1692), followed by English pioneers from the Connecticut Valley into Sheffield (1725). By necessity, preoccupied with land acquisition, stone walls and surveyor's

chain, they quickly carved the Housatonic Greenway into 10 of the county's 32 townships; another ten touched river tributaries. The towns were divided into private ownerships from Col. John Ashley's thousands of acres in the south, to Jacob Wendell's thousands in the north, not to count the Yankee who tried to sell Pontoosuc Lake for a hayfield when it was covered with three feet of snow.

Use of the river and of natural resources became requisite. There were literally hundreds of dams on the river and the watershed streams powering sawmills, gristmills, barkmills and tanneries. Then manufacturing and industry had requirements for water and its power: paper, iron, glass, lumber, cloth, clothing and much else. "The hideous howling wilderness", with mountain lion, bear, wolf, rattlesnake and Indian had been tamed by cattle, corn, and Elkanah Watson's Marino sheep.

Keystone of the Housatonic Greenway and example for the future was Laurel Hill, given to the town of Stockbridge in 1834 by the Sedgwick family; it is a scenic knoll rising from the riverbank. The Laurel Hill Association, founded in 1853, a pioneer conservation organization in this country, holds its Laurel Hill Day on this knoll where today the crickets still chirp "Sedgwick, Sedgwick".

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The Axe Age and the Ox Age were gone about 1840; the Horse Age and later the Auto Age ensued. The watchword use became abuse, misuse and overuse.

The railroad and subsequently the trolley invaded the Housatonic Greenway taking advantage of the easy gradient. Roads and bridges multiplied. Land was subdivided until only the Registries of Deeds knew how many ownerships touched the river. Pollution became abysmal. Towns, industries and individuals treated the river like a sewer, a

disposal and a dump for everything from autos to refrigerators, from bedsprings to shopping carts, etc., etc.

William Stanley, whose transformer sent alternating current around the world, never dreamed that the wastes and PCBs from his heir apparent, the General Electric Company, would contaminate his own side yard in Great Barrington, or the back yard of idealist Norman Rockwell in Stockbridge, or the front yard of naturalist Hal Borland in Salisbury, Connecticut.

Where the river is dammed near the Lee-Lenox line, scenic Woods Pond has become a toxic "Slough of Despond" for the company. Its reflective surface conceals 120 acres of sewage sludge ladened with PCBs which were used in transformers from 1934 to 1977. While scientists look for ways of breaking down or cleaning up polychlorinated biphenyls, these quietly go on poisoning and killing all surrounding life by invading food chains, periodically carrying their lethal effects downstream with every flood. Call it four decades of heedless negligence since industry commonly claimed the right to pollute.

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After the century of abuse, there came hopeful signs for the Housatonic Greenway. In the 1960s, the Inland Wetlands Protection Act was passed. Conservation commissions were activated. The Housatonic Watershed Association, the Berkshire Natural Resources Council and the Berkshire-Litchfield Environmental Council took up the cause. The National Park Service, the state Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, and the Division of Forests and Parks have land on the river. The Berkshire Land Trust, other land trusts, some conservation commissions and park departments and golf courses acquired river land.

Once, canoeing down the Housatonic, this observer passed over the Cyclop's eye of an ancient millstone staring ironically up through the murk at transmission lines that carried the highest voltage on earth. Later, the General Electric Company removed its lines and towers and returned the land to greenway. But I, too, a life member of the Thoreau Society, had been part of the problem when, in the '40s and '50s, I had sprayed potato fields with the old lead arsenate and tne new DDT while yet the Bash Bish peregrines flew overhead, bellwether birds that here fly no more.

The Clean Water Act was passed; clean-up progressed; sewage treatment was updated; wastes were impounded; dumps were relocated or land-filled; water grade improved from D to C, to B in places where trout reappeared.

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I wish to acknowledge with thanks, permission given by the Berkshire Eagle to reprint these "Our Berkshires" columns that appeared on the op-ed page from 1960 to 1974. These columns are presented like a torch to a new generation approaching the 21st century, with the hope that they may inform and kindle enthusiasm for river restoration, preservation, and land acquisition along the banks for multiple use by the public or for sanctuary from it. They may help to show that the patchwork park strung along the ribbon of the river, is a lively migratory flyway, and a botanical treasure-house of the Transition Zone, with classrooms for geology, archaeology, history and ecology. Also they may help the ribbon jewel that is in our midst deserve the name "Housatonic Greenway".

On the river land named "Canoe Meadows" in 1849
by Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes

Morgan Bulkeley
June 23, 1993