

3 Historical and Social Perspective

3.1 History of the Watershed

The North Branch Park River and its watershed, as it exists today, reflect the rich cultural history of the Hartford metropolitan area as well as many dramatic changes since the 1600s that have altered the development patterns along the river and within its watershed, the physical characteristics of the river, and even the name of the river itself. The following sections provide a brief history of the North Branch Park River watershed.

Before European settlers arrived along the Connecticut River, the Sukiaug and other Native American tribes populated the areas along the Connecticut and Park Rivers, which were first known as the Great and Little rivers. Dutch traders established a trading post near the mouth of the Little River. English settlers arrived two years later, in 1635, following Reverend Thomas Hooker's parish and found the confluence of the Great and Little rivers an ideal location. They settled near the Dutch trading post along the Little River. To their north and south, other settlements were being populated which would become known as Windsor and Wethersfield.

By 1640, the first mills were built and required the damming of the Little River. During this time the Little River began to be known as the Mill River. Hartford continued to grow through

The Park River was known as the “Hog River” during the 1800s due to the pigsties and slaughterhouses along its banks that used the river as an open sewer.

the 1780s. Industry along the river included a rum distillery and a large woolen mill, from which George Washington ordered a suit. By the 19th century, tanneries, a dye house, pigsties and slaughterhouses, brickyards, and tenements were built along the banks of the Mill River. The city's residents likely began calling the Mill River the Hog River due to the industries along its banks that

used the river as an open sewer, most notably the pigsties and slaughterhouses that dumped their waste into the river.

The conditions along the Hog River continued to deteriorate as the city grew; problems included crowded tenements, poverty, poor sanitation, polluted water and air. In the mid-19th century, these problems became a growing concern of civic leaders, led by Reverend Horace Bushnell. He proposed building a central park to serve as a place for city residents to



The Park River, circa 1895 (Taylor Collection, Connecticut State Library).

enjoy outdoor recreation. Bushnell Park was opened in 1865, and the Hog River was renamed to the Park River in reference to Bushnell Park.

In the 1880s, the Park River water quality continued to suffer from direct, untreated discharge of human and animal sewage and industrial waste. A joint committee was formed on what was called the “Park River Nuisance” that proposed initiatives to prevent waste from entering the river and to flush the waste more quickly down the river by pumping water into the Park River during low flow. Eventually, the city wastewater system expanded to collect sewage and other wastes, treat it, and discharge it to the Connecticut River.

However, the early sewer systems were designed to carry both stormwater runoff and sanitary sewage in the same pipes. During smaller storms, wastewater treatment facilities receive and treat the flow from these combined sewers before discharging it to the Connecticut River. During larger storms, however, the combined sewers can become overwhelmed by stormwater runoff, discharging untreated wastewater directly to the North Branch Park River. Combined sewers still exist in some areas of the North Branch Park River watershed, resulting in numerous combined sewer overflows (CSOs) each year. The MDC is implementing a major infrastructure improvement program known as “The Clean Water Project” to eliminate CSOs in the North Branch Park River.

Concerns related to the North Branch Park River are not limited to water quality; flood control is also a significant challenge that became prominent in the 20th century. Two large storms occurred in the 1930s that resulted in major floods in Hartford and other areas of Connecticut, in 1936 and 1938. In response to these floods, the Hartford Department of Engineers and the U.S. War Department developed plans for dikes to protect the city from the Connecticut River and for twin underground conduits to control flooding along the Park River.



The Park River conduits during construction, circa 1942. (Hartford Collection, Hartford Public Library).

Burial of the Park River began in September 1940 and was completed three years later. The first phase of the conduit was just over a mile long and ended between the Capitol and Armory buildings. The majority of the flood control system was completed in 1943, although additional changes were constructed following flooding caused by Hurricane Diane in 1955, including construction of a section of the conduit from the Armory to Farmington Avenue in the early 1960s (Normen, 2008). The flood control system remains intact today. The system of underground conduits conveys both the North and South branches of the Park River below Hartford to an outfall on the Connecticut River.



A channelized section of the Park River, circa 1968 (Hartford Collection, Hartford Public Library).

While the flood control projects of the last century have protected the City of Hartford from the type of catastrophic floods that occurred in the 1930s and 1950s, channelization and burial of portions of the North Branch Park River dramatically altered the physical and habitat characteristics of the river and the land development patterns along the river and within its watershed. These changes have disconnected the river from the surrounding communities and have contributed to the river's deteriorated water quality and degraded habitat conditions that exist today.

3.2 Population and Demographics

Although the North Branch Park River watershed is located within portions of six communities, the majority of the watershed's population resides in Bloomfield, Hartford, and

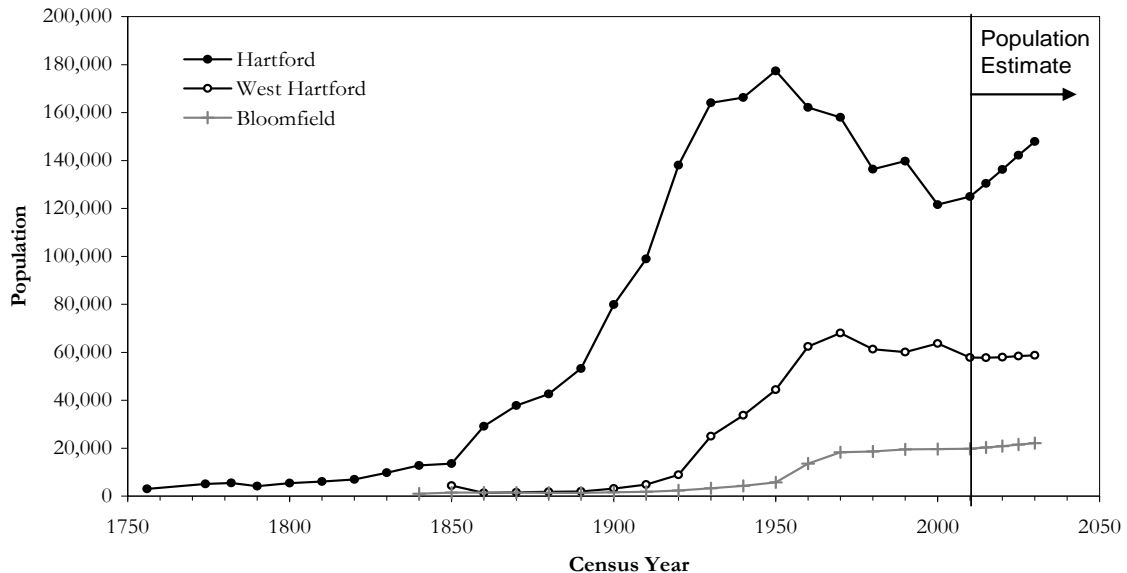
The total watershed population is estimated at approximately 48,000 residents, with 41% of the population residing in the City of Hartford, 21% in West Hartford, and 38% in Bloomfield.

West Hartford. The following sections provide a summary of overall population trends in these three communities, as well as population and demographic information for the North Branch Park River watershed.

The city of Hartford reached a peak population in 1950 of approximately 180,000 residents. Hartford's population began to decline in the late 1950s as city

residents began to seek a higher quality of life in the suburbs. The decline in Hartford's population continued through the 1990s although has reversed since the most recent 2000 census (*Figure 3-1*). The most recent three-year estimated household population in Hartford (2005-2007) is 110,774 (U.S Census Bureau, 2008). Future population estimates by the Connecticut State Data Center predict an increase in population in the City of Hartford in the next 20 years. West Hartford continued to grow until 1970 as a result of the migration out of the urban core and reached a maximum population of approximately 68,000, with an estimated

2005-2007 household population of 61,165 (U.S Census Bureau, 2008). Bloomfield also experienced a large population increase between 1950 and 1970, but has remained stable since then with a population of 19,587 based on the 2000 census. The populations of West Hartford and Bloomfield are predicted to be stable between 2010 and 2030.



Source: US Census and Connecticut State Data Center

Figure 3-1. Population Trends

According to the Capital Region’s Census Data Profile Report (Capitol Region Council of Governments, 2003) , the pattern of housing unit increase over the 1960 to 2000 period reflects the shift in the Region’s population from city to suburbs. In 2000, there were 294,092 housing units in the Capitol Region. The number of housing units in the Capitol Region increased more rapidly than population over this forty-year period, increasing by 72% as compared to the 32% increase in population. This is due both to declining household sizes and the movement of households from older, urbanized communities to new housing in the suburbs.

While the trend of increasing suburbanization may be tempered by the recent economic downturn in Connecticut and nationally, this recent trend of movement away from the urban center raises concerns about the loss of open space and development pressure on nearby suburban and rural communities. Such a trend within the North Branch Park River watershed could result in further development pressure in the headwater areas of Bloomfield, West Hartford, and Avon. Initiatives that protect open space and reinforce sustainable development within the urban center where infrastructure already exists are intended to address these concerns.

Population and demographic information within the North Branch Park River watershed was analyzed using 2000 U.S. Census data. There are 39 census blockgroups and 497 blocks located wholly or mostly within the watershed. From this data, the total watershed population is estimated at approximately 48,000, with approximately 41% of the population residing in the City of Hartford, 21% in West Hartford, 38% in Bloomfield, and less than 1% in Simsbury, Avon, and Windsor combined. *Figure 3-2* summarizes the racial and ethnic composition of the watershed's population. The majority of the watershed population is white (86.7%), 4.3% are Hispanic, 3.4% are Asian, 2.0% are Black, and 3.7% are reported as Multi-race or Other.

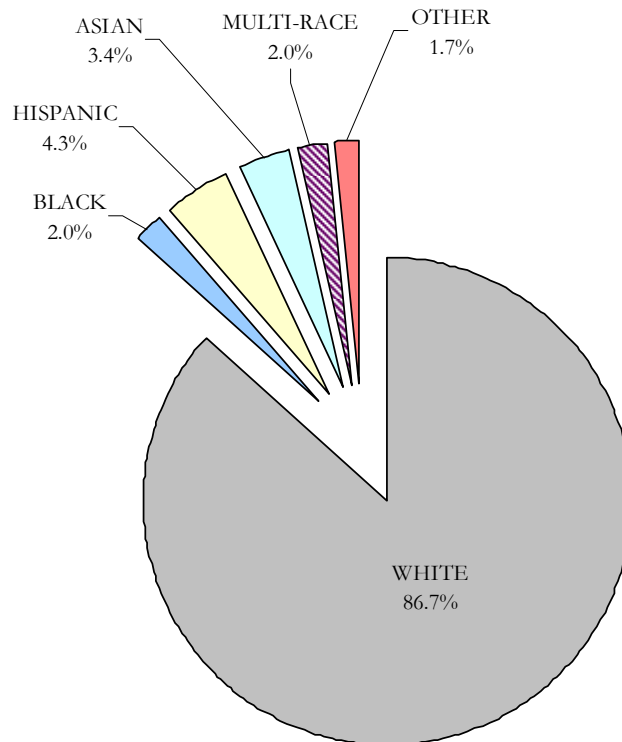


Figure 3-2. Demographics in the North Branch Park River Watershed

3.3 Historical Resources

The North Branch Park River watershed has a rich cultural history and is home to numerous sites and buildings that are on the State or National Register of Historic Places. Existing State or National-registered historic places in the watershed are listed in *Table 3-1*. Several of the notable cultural resources in the watershed include:

- The Harriet Beecher Stowe House, which served as the residence of this well-known abolitionist from 1873 through her death in 1896. This residence is located in the Nook Farm grounds, a former compound of artists and writers.
- The Mark Twain House, neighboring the Harriet Beecher Stowe House on the Nook Farm grounds.
- The Connecticut Governor's Residence, located on Prospect Avenue in Hartford is a 19-room Georgian Revival Colonial home.

- The 22-room Goodwin Mansion and Estate is owned by the City of Hartford. The property was built in 1903 for Walter L. Goodwin, a descendant of a family that had been influential in developing the city.
- Elizabeth Park, a public park with recreational areas and a 2.5-acre rose garden with 800 varieties of roses.
- Heublein Tower, a six-story observation structure built atop the Metacomet Ridge by Gilbert F. Heublein, a hotelier and restaurateur in Hartford, which is now open to the public.
- There are four historic districts within the watershed (listed in *Table 3-1*), including
 - Little Hollywood Historic District
 - Nook Farm and Woodland Street District (the Nook Farm grounds being the location of the Mark Twain and Harriet Beecher Stowe houses)
 - West End North Historic District
 - West End South Historic District

In December 2006, the Hartford City Council adopted an ordinance that protects properties designated on the State or National Register of Historic Places from unauthorized demolition or alteration. The ordinance states that all work requiring a building permit being performed on properties that are individually listed or within a historic district must gain the approval of the Historic Preservation Commission before they may receive a permit. Building permit applicants who are subject to this requirement must fill out an Application for Historic Review in the City's Department of Licenses & Inspections.

Table 3-1. National Register of Historic Places

Town/City	Date Listed	Resource Name	Address
Bloomfield	5/15/2007	Filley, Capt. Oliver, House	130 Mountain Ave.
Bloomfield	3/25/1982	Gillette, Francis, House	545 Bloomfield Ave.
Bloomfield	10/18/1972	Old Farm Schoolhouse	Jct. of Park Ave. and School St.
Bloomfield	7/24/1992	Southwest District School	430 Simsbury Rd.
Hartford	4/19/1994	Austin, A. Everett, House	130 Scarborough St.
Hartford	7/31/1994	Barlow, Boce W., Jr., House	31 Canterbury St.
Hartford	6/28/1982	Children's Village of the Hartford Orphan Asylum	1680 Albany Ave.
Hartford	4/16/1971	Day House	77 Forest St.
Hartford	3/10/1983	Elizabeth Park	Asylum Ave.
Hartford	3/2/1989	Engine Company 16 Fire Station	636 Blue Hills Ave.
Hartford	6/26/1986	Hartford Golf Club Historic District	Roughly bounded by Simsbury Rd. and Bloomfield Ave., Northmoor Rd., Albany Ave., and Mohegan Dr.
Hartford	6/22/1982	Hartford Seminary Foundation	55 Elizabeth St. and 72-120 Sherman St.
Hartford	11/29/1979	Hooker, John and Isabella, House	140 Hawthorn St.
Hartford	2/24/1983	House at 36 Forest Street	36 Forest St.
Hartford	4/29/1982	Little Hollywood Historic District	Farmington Ave., Owen, Frederick and Denison Sts.
Hartford	10/31/1975	Lyman House	22 Woodland St.

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Town/City	Date Listed	Resource Name	Address
Hartford	11/29/1979	Nook Farm and Woodland Street District	Woodland, Gillett, and Forest Sts., and Farmington Ave.
Hartford	12/14/1978	Perkins-Clark House	49 Woodland St.
Hartford	8/29/1985	Prospect Avenue Historic District	Roughly bounded by Albany Ave., N. Branch Park River, Elizabeth & Fern Sts., Prospect & Asylum Aves. & Sycamore Rd.
Hartford	2/24/1983	Spencer House	1039 Asylum Ave.
Hartford	10/6/1970	Stowe, Harriet Beecher, House	73 Forest St.
Hartford	12/1/1978	Temple Beth Israel	21 Charter Oak Ave.
Hartford	10/15/1966	Twain, Mark, House	351 Farmington Ave.
Hartford	3/23/1995	Watkinson Juvenile Asylum and Farm School	140, 180 and 190 Bloomfield Ave.
Hartford	7/25/1985	West End North Historic District	Roughly bounded by Farmington Ave., Lorraine, Elizabeth, and Highland Sts.
Hartford and West Hartford	4/11/1985	West End South Historic District	Roughly bounded by Farmington Ave., Whitney and S. Whitney Sts., West Blvd. and Prospect Ave.
Simsbury	6/30/1983	Heublein Tower	Talcott Mountain State Park
West Hartford	12/22/1983	Mount St. Joseph Academy	235 Fern St.
West Hartford	6/14/1979	Spanish House, The	46 Fernwood Rd.

3.4 Recreation and Community Resources

The North Branch Park River watershed provides opportunities for a variety of recreational activities, such as fishing, boating, cross-country skiing, picnicking, golf, and hiking. The oldest designated open space area near the North Branch Park River is Bushnell Park in Hartford, designated in 1865. Talcott Mountain State Park and the Penwood State Park are located in or near the watershed. West Hartford Reservoir, the Metacomet Hiking Trail, the Metacomet, Monadnock and Mattabesett National Scenic Trail, and Heublein Tower are prominent recreational features in the watershed.

The watershed is also home to the Greater Hartford Urban Outdoor Classroom and Nature Trail, a facility developed with assistance from the Eastern Connecticut Resource Conservation and Development Area, a nonprofit organization, working with community, educational, and government partners. There is a teachers' guide available for this area which assists the teacher and students in learning about habitats and wildlife found in the watershed.

Several golf courses are located throughout the watershed including the Wintonbury Hills Golf Course, Tumble Brook Country Club, Gillette Ridge Golf Course, Hartford Golf Club, and Wampanoag Country Club. Many of the municipal parks and schools located within the watershed provide public recreational opportunities.

Although fishing opportunities exist along the North Branch Park River tributaries as well as lakes and ponds within the watershed, fishing opportunities along the mainstem of the North Branch Park River are severely limited due to impaired water quality, degraded aquatic habitat, and limited river access. As discussed in Section 6 *Water Quality*, the North Branch Park River is designated by the CTDEP as impaired for fish habitat, other aquatic life and wildlife, and recreation due to nonpoint source pollution and channel modifications. Furthermore, the Park River is not included in the CTDEP Angler's Guide.