

# HAVERHILL TRADITIONS

A river runs through it



*The*  
**HAVERHILL  
GAZETTE**

Thursday, January 21, 2016

# About this special section

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *Each year, The Haverhill Gazette publishes a special section on Haverhill Traditions. The section has a special theme about a topic that has a wide effect on the community. The focus this year is the Merrimack River.*

Not long ago, local people avoided the Merrimack River at all costs.

They complained about its foul odors. They found memories of industrial pollutants being dumped into the water distasteful. Seeing fish and other wildlife dead on the riverbanks made matters worse.

Fast forward to today.

Boats buzz across the waterway. High-level housing projects are springing up on the riverbanks.

Fishermen cast their lines into the currents, hoping to catch that big one. People stroll on walkways at the edge of the water, which attracts visitors instead of repulsing them as it once did.

Today the river helps pump Haverhill's lifeblood, boosting its economy and giving people a place to play.

This special section tells how the Merrimack River went from being a liability to an asset.

This is the story of Haverhill's centerpiece for today and the future.

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# River is link to city's past, road to future

BY BILL CANTWELL  
STAFF WRITER

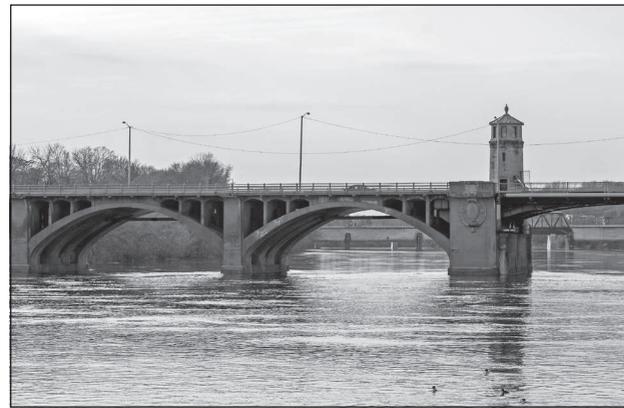
It's where Haverhill began — literally.

The Merrimack River helped plant the seeds of today's Haverhill when English settlers used the waterway to come here in 1640.

A community grew along the river, eventually becoming a shoe-making giant. As Haverhill people made their livings in factories that sent footwear around the world, the Merrimack was a key to the economy. The river supplied water to the factories and provided a natural "highway" used by barges to ship shoes across the nation and the world.

But the city was not kind to the lifeblood of its economy. The very industry that depended on the river threatened its health, as factories dumped pollutants into the Merrimack, turning it into a virtual cesspool. Factory workers poured chemicals into the river as readily as drivers once tossed trash out their car windows.

As the shoe industry began dying out in Haverhill in the late 1960s, however, an



AMANDA SABGA/Staff photo

The Merrimack River flows under the Basiliere Bridge, which unites downtown with Bradford.

awareness grew of the need to restore the river's health. The federal government banned dumping. Cleanup efforts began in hopes the Merrimack would one day become a centerpiece for the region's economy and recreation.

That day has arrived in Haverhill.

In recent years, marinas have popped up along the riverbanks. A rail trail is being built on the Bradford side of the river, using the waterway's beauty to lure hikers and bikers.

Two boardwalks line parts

of the downtown side of the river, giving people places to stroll between visits to restaurants, lounges and shops.

The new crown jewel of the downtown, the Harbor Place complex being built next to the river, will include another boardwalk. The city hopes to eventually link the boardwalks together, creating a long, single walkway at the river's edge.

Haverhill is also working to ensure that future housing projects along the river embrace the waterway. Those projects must allow public access to the river by

giving people places where they can walk next to the water.

Fishing the Merrimack, something that scarcely happened a few decades ago, is popular today. Groups of anglers gather regularly at spots such as the river walkway on Water Street across from the Buttonwoods Museum.

Residents gather along the riverbanks for community festivals and some people even take dips in the river on hot summer days.

And as for a "resident" that was here long before the English settlers arrived 375 years ago, special arrangements have been made to preserve the river as home to sturgeon fish. Haverhill has joined the federal government in protecting the huge prehistoric fish that still live in the Merrimack. The city is even trying to cash in on the sturgeon by using its story and image to attract tourists.

From economic benefits to recreation and culture, Haverhill has rediscovered the river — a gem that promises to be a centerpiece for the community's future.

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# Mayor: Rail trail along river will attract tourists

By PETER FRANCIS  
STAFF REPORTER

A trail being built in an old railroad bed is designed to draw tourists to the Merrimack River and also give locals a pleasant place to walk close to home.

Mayor James Fiorentini said the Bradford Rail Trail, which he hopes will be completed by 2019 or 2020, will provide an opportunity for more visitors to experience Haverhill and its stretch of the Merrimack River.

“Ultimately, we’re hoping that thousands of people can use this,” Fiorentini said, explaining the project is divided into three phases, the last of which will connect the trail with neighboring Groveland.

Fiorentini said the city is accepting bids from companies interested in building the first phase, which will be between the Comeau and Basiliere Bridges. He said he hopes the city will break ground on that section in the spring.

The second phase will run from the Basiliere Bridge to the Crescent Yacht Club, and Fiorentini has hired a firm to conduct a title search for the land, formerly owned by Pan Am Railways. In October, the City Council agreed to let Fiorentini buy the land for



John and Cheryl Salvi of Bradford take a stroll along the river during a break from cleaning part of the Bradford Rail Trail.

CARL RUSSO/file photo

the second phase for \$125,000.

“We’re hoping to purchase that land between March and April,” said the mayor, adding the city made an agreement with an outside group to strip out the old train rails. “We allowed them to keep the iron as payment.”

Other than the \$125,000, the city has not spent a lot of money

on the project, which is estimated will cost about \$1.8 million once completed. Most of the money is coming from the state.

The city has spent about \$5,000 on a paving underlay which will allow people to walk the first phase of the trail until the final trail is completed.

“We received a state grant to



RYAN HUTTON/Staff photo

During a summertime stroll, City Councilor Colin LePage shows where part of the Bradford Rail Trail is to be built near the south side of Basiliere Bridge.

design the trail and once we’ve purchased the land, we can then get the project on the Transportation Improvement Project, or TIP, list,” said Fiorentini of the state list which provides federal and state money for projects which are a quarter of the way through their design.

In addition to increased commerce and foot traffic along the Merrimack River, Fiorentini believes Bradford residents whose homes are near the river will receive a huge benefit from the

trail’s presence.

“It will greatly boost property values,” said the mayor, before referencing a childhood friend who lives in Newburyport and was cautious about that city’s rail trail project.

“He was initially opposed to it, but it’s raised the value of his home,” Fiorentini said. “My hope is it will do the same for people living in Bradford along the river.”

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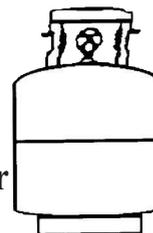
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# What's in a name?

By MIKE LABELLA  
STAFF WRITER



AMANDA SABGA/Staff photo

A view of the Merrimack River, which flows through the city of Haverhill and under the Basiliere Bridge, seen above.

**W**ith a name like Harbor Place, you'd expect it to have some connection to water.

So it's no surprise that the downtown's biggest developments in decades is situated on the banks of the Merrimack River, close to where sailing ships were built more than a century ago and where, in later years, steamships packed with passengers traveled back and forth between Haverhill and Salisbury's beachfront rocks.

The \$70 million Harbor Place development, which is being built almost exactly where the city's shipyards existed, will feature a satellite campus for UMass Lowell, plus businesses and housing.

William Pillsbury, economic development director for the city, said construction of Harbor Place will be completed this year.

"The exciting and transformative Harbor Place project is proceeding right on schedule," Pillsbury said. "First, the steel began to rise out of the remains of the former Woolworth building and utility work was installed. Today, the

entire structure is framed and the interior is beginning to take shape. Soon the building will be fully enclosed and the windows overlooking the beautiful Merrimack River will be in place."

Harbor Place is designed to boost the eastern end of downtown the way that hundreds of new housing units in old vacant shoe factories have helped the western end of downtown in recent years. That housing, plus a new parking garage and a popular restaurant district, have brought a new energy and economic boost to western downtown.

"For many years, we've tried to highlight the water," Mayor James Fiorentini said. "It's the centerpiece at that end of town and it is the main entryway into downtown."

Fiorentini said as many as 10,000 people a day drive by this area and will see Harbor Place. He said it has the dual advantage of being on the water, which highlights the riverfront, and also puts to use this historic property that went unused for decades when it was occupied by the vacant Woolworth building.

Pillsbury said all of the city's development efforts in this area seek to activate uses on the

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waterfront and return the waterfront to its prominent place in the city's history.

Harbor Place is being built on the site of the former Woolworth building, which opened in 1949 and closed in 1970.

"We will see in the Harbor Place project and several others that will commence ... the negative impact of the flawed urban renewal projects of the 1960s reversed," he said.

"The spaces leveled by urban renewal will be filled with the walkable, pedestrian-friendly, Merrimack River-focused development Haverhill has long desired and will now see," he said.

The Merrimack Street Ventures project is a partnership between the non-profit Greater Haverhill Foundation, the same group that developed the Ward Hill Business Park in the 1960s, and the Planning Office for Urban Affairs, the nonprofit



AMANDA SABGA/Staff photo

**The Harbor Place project is enclosed in plastic to allow construction during the winter.**

residential development arm of the Boston Catholic Archdiocese. The two groups have received millions of dollars in funding from the state with the help of Haverhill state Rep. Brian Dempsey.

The first phase of the project is a five-story commercial building where the former Woolworth building stood vacant for more than 40 years.

The steel frame of the building it up and work is happening within the structure, which will house HC Media on the first floor, the UMass Lowell satellite campus on the second and third floors, Pentucket Bank on the fourth floor and tenants yet to be chosen on the fifth floor. A plaza and two other public entrance points will provide public

access to the river, where a boardwalk will be built.

That building will be followed closely by construction of a neighboring six-story building to include 50 units of workforce housing, 30 units of market-rate housing, and first-floor retail shops and restaurants. A boardwalk will be built along the river behind the development. Future plans may include a boat dock.

Haverhill has a rich shipbuilding history dating back to the 1600s, with most of the shipbuilding taking place on the river between Washington Square and where the Buttonwoods Museum is now located on Water Street.

Ships were also built in yards just downstream from the Groveland Bridge and in Rocks Village.

The bulk of shipbuilding activities in Haverhill ended in the early to mid-1800s.

## Housing developments must allow public access to river

BY MIKE LABELLA  
STAFF WRITER

The city is eyeing several key properties along the Merrimack River for redevelopment – but there's a catch. New zoning requires developers to provide public access to the river. City leaders adopted the zoning so the public will not be shut out from the waterway.

One of those projects is the old Friend's Landing nightclub, which will have a public walkway along the river.

Ernie Cioto, who owns a commercial building on a 1.5-acre site on the Bradford side of the river, wants to build dozens of condominiums on the river's edge at 38 Railroad St. He said the city's new waterfront zoning is just the change needed to make his dream come true.

Previously, his building was part of Hoyt & Worthen Tanning Corp. at 60 Railroad St., a site city officials are also hoping will eventually be redeveloped.

Mayor James Fiorentini said both the "Biscotti" building, as he refers to the 38 Railroad St. property, and the Hoyt & Worthen Tanning building are in areas that would be perfect for residential development – just as long as the public is given access to the river. Frank Franzone received City Council approval to construct a 59-unit, five-story upscale condominium building on the 1.2 acre parcel at 85 Water St. The plan would include a waterfront park with public docks. Other Bradford parcels being eyed for riverfront development include an unused 20-acre property where Haverhill Paperboard company operated for decades, the former Taylor-Goodwin Lumber Yard near the Crescent Yacht Club, and the Ornstein Heel property just west of the Comeau Bridge. Properties on the Haverhill side of the river include the former Cleary Cleaners site and former Skelly Motors site, both of which are on Water Street near Mike's Sunoco service station.



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# City's stretch of Merrimack a summertime playground

## Cleaner river draws boaters, marinas

By MIKE LABELLA  
STAFF WRITER

Haverhill's stretch of the Merrimack River has evolved from a virtual cesspool in the 1960s and '70s to a popular place for boating.

The Crescent Yacht Club and several other local marinas have been booming in recent years, after pollutants ranging from raw sewage to chemical waste from businesses were banned from the river and the federal government led a cleanup. As the Environmental Protection Agency got involved, all of the dumping stopped.

The increase in boating has boosted Haverhill's economy and image.

Haverhill's stretch of the river becomes a beehive of activity each summer. Cabin cruisers, small fishing boats, speed boats towing water skiers, kayaks, canoes and even paddle boats dot the water's surface.

"There's a lot of people using the river who would not go near it before," said Dave Goodwin, a Plaistow resident who grew up on the banks of the river in Merrimacport. "The water is much cleaner and it's now considered a Class B river, which is good enough to swim in. And it doesn't smell like it used to years ago."

Goodwin, a member of the Exchange Club of Haverhill, the Crescent Yacht Club and the Greater Haverhill Foundation, said that years ago the banks of the river were a deep muck in which you'd sink up to your calves.

"Today, as the water has become cleaner, the banks are more of a hard pack



FILE PHOTO

The Crescent Yacht Club on the Bradford side of the river is a popular spot for boaters.

sand and you don't sink in like you used to," he said. "Haverhill's section of the river has a hard pack base now and I attribute that to a reversal of pollution. It took years, but the results are that it's a pretty river now. You can navigate by boat from Haverhill to the ocean, and over the past few years we've been working to create safer river navigation."

Goodwin, 62, has a 35-foot Downeast Cruiser with a 3 1/2-foot draft.

"I'll travel up the coast to Maine to places such as Bar Harbor and Boothbay Harbor," he said.

For boaters who have had trouble navigating some of the trickier stretches of the river in Haverhill, such as downstream from the Rocks Village Bridge where there is a significant amount of ledge and upstream between the Basiliere and Comeau Bridges, the Greater Haverhill Foundation has

some good news.

Goodwin said the foundation, which is a partner in the construction of the Harbor Place development at the eastern end of downtown, knows the importance of the river to the city's future.

"The foundation, of which I'm on the river committee, in October 2013 contracted with a firm to do a survey of the channel to confirm or verify depths and buoy locations," Goodwin said.

He said the result of that effort was the relocation, replacement and installation of new buoys by the Coast Guard. The changes will make for much safer navigation of the river, especially for larger boats, he said.

Goodwin said the survey of the river bottom included an area between the Basiliere and Comeau bridges, including where there are public docks behind the Tap Restaurant. City officials



FILE PHOTO

Donny Carey takes the cover off his 25-foot Baja speed boat at the Crescent Yacht Club.

said they expanded those docks in recent years in hopes of attracting boaters from downriver communities to Haverhill. The hope is

those visitors will shop and dine downtown.

"The foundation is working with the city and harbor master to put out private aids

(buoys) ... so you can safely travel up to the public docks," Goodwin said. "With proper buoys, you'll be able to safely pass through there."

# Tale of mystery boosts river's lure

## City markets story, image of prehistoric sturgeon fish

BY MIKE LABELLA  
STAFF WRITER

When there's a push on to draw tourists, it doesn't hurt to have a story with a mysterious edge involved.

Haverhill is trying to take advantage of that by marketing the story of the sturgeon, a prehistoric fish that still lives in Merrimack River and reproduces there. Not long ago, it was discovered that some sturgeon have been traveling between rivers in Maine and the Merrimack.

A few years ago, local students created artsy images of sturgeon that were displayed downtown. The city also has a river mascot — Sammy the Sturgeon, which serves as a symbol of the annual River Ruckus festival.

Sturgeon can be 4 to 6 feet long or even bigger — but are seldom seen. They are also protected by the federal government, which bans construction work such as bridge repairs during the spring spawning season.

River Ruckus co-chairman Tim Jordan said the annual River Ruckus event is intended to highlight the river and its ties to the city.

"When we held our first River Ruckus in 2010, somebody came up with the idea for the mascot for the event to be the sturgeon," Jordan said. "We thought it would be a fun thing to do."

Jordan said local artist Rob Sardella came up with the Sammy the Sturgeon logo — with Sammy dressed in a Hawaiian shirt.

"People had been talking about the river and how it was underutilized, so we wanted to have a festival that highlighted the city, drew people to Haverhill and have a fun day and also showcase the river."

Once thought to number less than 100 in the Merrimack, the river's short-nose sturgeon

*New estimates are that as many as 2,000 adults, in two distinct groups, inhabit the river. One group includes fish born in Haverhill's spawning grounds, while the other consists of fish born in Maine rivers, such as the Kennebec and Androscoggin. Those sturgeon migrate to the Merrimack, researchers said.*

population appears to be on the rebound, researchers said.

New estimates are that as many as 2,000 adults, in two distinct groups, inhabit the river. One group includes fish born in Haverhill's spawning grounds, while the other consists of fish born in Maine rivers such as the Kennebec and Androscoggin. Those sturgeon migrate to the Merrimack, researchers said.

Researchers said that for much of the year, these sturgeon are looking for food in the lower part of the Merrimack — from Amesbury to the Joppa Flats in Newburyport — and live there from November to March.

Haverhill is the only place in the river where sturgeon lay eggs, and that happens in the spring.

The Merrimack River's short-nose sturgeon is a species protected by law. Harming or harassing one is punishable by a fine of up to \$20,000, according to federal law.

When the state began building the new Comeau Bridge in 2003 at the western end of downtown, work was slowed during the spring spawning season of the short-nose sturgeon so the fish would not be disturbed. The new bridge opened in the fall of 2007.

Officials said their spawning ground in Haverhill has not been pinpointed, but it is between the Comeau and Basiliere bridges and ends about a mile upstream.

A sturgeon matures in eight to 12 years and can

live to age 60. It has a shark-like tail and four sensory barbels that protrude from the nose to detect food.

Sturgeon are bottom-feeders that eat sand worms, mollusks and crustaceans. Harvesting for their flesh and caviar in the mid-1800s caused a sharp decline in their numbers.

In 2004, Barney Gallagher, longtime writer for The Eagle-Tribune and Haverhill Gazette, suggested Haverhill capitalize on the sturgeon by naming it "Merry Mac" and using it to promote the city.

"Accounts of early life along the river tell of how important the sturgeon was to the settlers, along, of course, with other kinds of fish," he wrote. "They used it for food, they sent it back to England, they even used the funny 'scales' for various things because they were bony as opposed to the usually slick scales of other fish."

Last year, the Soles of Haverhill committee named one of its giant shoes "Merry Mac," Haverhill's Rollicking River Monster. Gallagher had envisioned "a big sturgeon with a big grin, leaping out of the water to greet everyone."

Several years ago, the city hoped to dredge the river, particularly in the waters off the downtown area in order to allow larger boats to travel here. Federal officials put a stop to it as the short-nose sturgeon lays its eggs among rocks that would be removed during dredging.



CARL RUSSO/Staff photo

Haverhill High School Art Club students, from left, Brandi Pittman, Bethany Spreadborough and Kate Rothgaber look at a 16-foot long sculpture of a sturgeon they created along with other art students. The work was on display in downtown Columbus Park.

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# An 'awesome' place to fish

By MIKE LABELLA  
STAFF WRITER

**F**ishing in the Merrimack River is simply "awesome." So said Vincent Ouellette, director of recreation for the city.

He and other observers of the river said its popularity with fishermen has grown in recent years as the Merrimack became cleaner and more species of fish entered the waterway.

Those observers said the Merrimack is one of the best places to catch striped bass when they are running and it's also home to freshwater species such as large-mouth bass and the more fierce small-mouth bass, which put up a good fight.

Harbormaster Michael Vets said fishing on the Merrimack ramps up when stripers come up river in late May to early June to chase herring, their favorite food.

Vets said the herring run all the way up to the dam in Lawrence, and stripers can



CARL RUSSO/file photo

**Fishing the Merrimack River off Water Street across from the Buttonwoods Museum are, from left, David Campbell, 15, his brother Jason, 13, and their friend A.J. DeRoche, 16, all of Haverhill.**

be caught anywhere from the mouth of the river to the dam.

"That's the biggest attraction on the river,"

Vets said about fishing the Merrimack.

Not only are stripers a good fighting fish, but they

are a good eating fish.

Other fish are making their way into the river, providing anglers with variety.

"What I've noticed over the past few years is freshwater fishing is getting better," Vets said. "People I talk to have been catching freshwater bass, which means they could be coming out of tributary rivers and streams (and into the river)."

Every spring, there's a fishing derby organized by Crescent Yacht Club on the Bradford side of the river. Prizes of fishing equipment are awarded for the biggest catch in various categories.

"The stripers come up early, but all summer long you can catch perch, hornpout, large-mouth bass, small-mouth bass and plenty of carp, as well as shad and even herring," said Ken Etter, 76, a long-time member of the yacht club. "When we have the derby, carp is on that list and you can win \$100."

Etter said derby participants typically fish from small boats, as well as from canoes and kayaks, but some folks toss in lines from the shore. One popular location is on the Haverhill side of the river next to the Water Street fire station.

"All summer long there's fishing," Etter said.

When the striped bass are running, you're sure to see a crowd near the Rocks Village Bridge. That's also a popular spot for shad fishing.

"A lot of people fish along the shore, both above and below the bridge," Etter

said. "Where the landing is on the West Newbury side, it's fairly shallow so you'll see people with waders fishing for stripers."

One species that travels the river is sturgeon, a protected fish that can grow to 4 to 6 feet long. If caught, they must be carefully released.

"There's some really big ones in the river," Etter said. "You can see them on our fish finders."

After the strong river currents of spring have subsided and summer comes around, the Merrimack becomes a popular place for small water craft such as canoes and kayaks. Some people fish from those smaller craft, while others are out on the water simply enjoying nature.

"The water flows more slowly in the summer and it's lower," Etter said.

The river is also cleaner that it has been in decades.

"When I was a kid, I used to trap muskrat and mink down by where the paper mill was, and the water was so dirty I didn't want to put my feet in it," he said. "Today I would not mind swimming in it."

There's also a lot more fish in the river than Etter can ever remember.

"We never had grass or weeds growing years ago. It was all just muck," he said. "Now you have plants sprouting up, which provides small fish a place to hide and grow."

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# Merrimack echoes community's past

## Spots along river rich in history

By MIKE LABELLA  
STAFF WRITER

**H**averhill's stretch of the Merrimack River is steeped in history, notably at the site of First Landing Park where English settlers landed in 1640.

Also of note is the spot several miles upriver where Colonial figure Hannah Duston landed after escaping from Native American Indians. The escape following a raid on Haverhill in which she and her nurse were taken captive and her baby was killed.

The first settlers arrived here by boat from what is now Newbury, and came ashore where a stream emptied into the Merrimack. The spot on Water Street is now occupied by First Landing Park, near the intersection of Water and Mill streets.

"It's a passive park and has been preserved for that purpose," said Vincent Ouellette, the city's recreation director. "Its historical value is it's where the settlers first landed in Haverhill."

Ouellette said the city once considered trying to use the area to access the river for boating, but it was decided the riverbank there was too steep. He said it's not an ideal place to fish, either, because of trees and overgrowth.

The first name of the town was Pentucket, a Native American word meaning "place of the winding river," but it was later changed to Haverhill in recognition of the home town in England of the settlement's first minister, John Ward.

Across the street from First Landing Park is the old Pentucket Burial Ground, the site of the first meeting house in Haverhill and one of the oldest cemeteries in the

city. Historical figures John Ward, Nathaniel Saltonstall, John White and members of the Duncan family are buried there.

Several miles upriver, you'll find a stone marker where in 1697 Hannah Duston came ashore after escaping natives who stormed Haverhill and took her and her nurse Mary Neff to an island in the Merrimack in what is now Boscaawen, N.H. During the raid, Duston's infant daughter was brutally killed.

While on the island, Duston seized an opportunity to escape.

She, her nurse and another captive, Samuel Lenarson grabbed their captor's pole-axes and killed two men and a squaw before tracking down several fleeing Indian children and slaying them, as well.

Duston and her companions climbed into a birch-bark canoe and made their way downriver, with Hannah landing in Haverhill in an area that was later named Hannah Duston Park.

The city renamed it Merrimack River Park several years ago. The new name was adopted because city officials had

concerns for a criminal reputation associated with the area, which forced them to close the park 15 years previously.

The park was reopened with the help of a group of residents, including Richard LeBlond, who now maintain the area from spring to fall.

LeBlond said one of his group's wishes is to create better access to the river for small water craft such as kayaks and canoes.

"People are into kayaking these days and I'm even thinking of doing it myself," LeBlond said. "There is a growing number of people who go kayaking and park their cars there."

LeBlond said he'd like to see a boat ramp installed.

"If we had a ramp, it would provide easier access so people don't have to drag their kayaks or canoes down a bank, yet they manage to do it somehow," he said.

In the meantime, LeBlond and a core group of four other volunteers are planning for this year's reopening of the park in April. They are also planning to recruit help from groups such as local Boy Scouts that want to get involved in beautification projects at the park.

Ouellette said the state has considered the area for a boat ramp, but determined it's not right for such as project. He said the water in that location either runs high and fast or low with exposed rocks. Building a ramp that is also handicap accessible would cost upwards of \$500,000, he said.

"Due to the tides, the rocks and the nature of the river, it's just not the best place for a boat ramp," Ouellette said. "It's not feasible and the state would not fund it."

Ouellette said Haverhill's stretch of the river offers other free public access points for putting in kayaks and canoes. Those spots include the public ramp next to Crescent Yacht Club on the Bradford side of the river.



FILE PHOTO

The monument at First Landing Park, where the community's settlers landed on the banks of the Merrimack River in 1640.

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# City's plan: Connect boardwalks along river

## Third walkway coming to downtown side of Merrimack

By MIKE LABELLA  
STAFF WRITER

**W**hat better way to market the Merrimack River than to bring visitors right to the edge of the waterway so they can spend leisure time there?

That's just what Haverhill has done and more of it is planned.

The city has two boardwalks on the downtown side of the river — one behind the Tap Restaurant and the other behind Haverhill Bank.

Another is planned at the Harbor Place project, and that boardwalk will tie into the boardwalk behind the bank.

The idea is to create a walkway from the bank to the Basiliere Bridge, which connects to the rail trail on the Bradford side of the river.

From there you can reach the Comeau Bridge, which brings you to the western end of Washington Street. Then it's a short hike to the boardwalk behind the Tap Restaurant, and back onto Washington Street and its many popular restaurants and other businesses. A short walk along Washington and then Merrimack Street brings you right back to the boardwalk behind Haverhill Bank.

In essence, it will create a walking loop around the downtown stretch of the river.

Mayor James Fiorentini said the boardwalk that will be built as part of the Harbor Place project is a key to creating the loop.

"It also gives us the opportunity to develop a boardwalk so we can link the Basiliere Bridge with

the Bradford Rail Trail," Fiorentini said. "We want to give people a lot of walking options."

In his recent inaugural address, Fiorentini talked about his vision for Haverhill becoming a more "walkable city."

He said he took the term from a new book by author Jeff Speck.

"A walkable city is a city where walking is a pleasure, with safe streets and clean streets, good parks and trails, good places to walk to, and good sidewalks to walk on and nice street trees to walk under," Fiorentini said in his recent newsletter. "There are thousands of people who want to live near downtown so they can walk downtown to get a bite to eat or just have a cup of coffee in the morning."

Fiorentini said building a more walkable city is a long-term goal, not a short-term one that will happen quickly.

William Pillsbury, economic development director for the city, said a public plaza behind the Harbor Place buildings will feature a river boardwalk that will connect to the existing boardwalk behind Haverhill Bank.

He said this will further return the focus of Merrimack Street to the river.

"Boating, kayaking, canoeing and other active water uses will be encouraged, and it is the hope of the city that entrepreneurs and visionary businesses will see the opportunity that the river presents for commercial business development," Pillsbury said.

The rail trail on the Bradford side of the river will be finished this summer and connected by the two bridges to the

downtown boardwalk for biking, walking, jogging or simply enjoying the beauty of the river, Pillsbury said.

"It really will be seen as a complete loop, where people can walk past downtown restaurants and other businesses," he said. "You can now cross either bridge and meet up with the rail trail. But there's also an opportunity to be engaged with our downtown businesses."

Pillsbury said the Harbor Place project will feature a large outdoor plaza with green space, benches and lighting. The plaza will serve as a public gathering space for events along with a boardwalk that will be literally be built on top of the flood wall along that stretch of the river.

"Stand on the boardwalk behind Haverhill Bank and imagine walking all the way to the Basiliere Bridge," Pillsbury said. "And you'll be able to go from the boardwalk directly onto the Basiliere Bridge and cross to the Bradford Rail Trail and all the way to the Comeau (Bridge) and to the Tap and come up onto Washington Street and its businesses, then get back on at Haverhill Bank."

"People love this type of opportunity to get outside and take a walk and engage with nature," he said.

Pillsbury said the Harbor Place project has a permit to add docks.

"We hope entrepreneurs will step forward and utilize this newly activated waterfront," he said. "We'd love to have people doing things along the river. Maybe something like bike rentals. The city's job is to create an environment where these kinds of things can happen."



MIKE LABELLA/ Staff photo

The boardwalk behind the Tap Restaurant gives downtown visitors a place to stroll along the river.



FILE PHOTO

A "noddle" (half Newfoundland and half poodle) named Moe wears a tie during a visit to the boardwalk at the western end of downtown.

# River becomes the community's gathering place

## Merrimack is centerpiece for festivals, fireworks, fun

BY MIKE LABELLA  
STAFF WRITER

It's the place to go for local celebrations.

Haverhill has several events each year centered around the Merrimack River.

In May it's the downtown KidsFEST celebration, followed by the July 4 festival and fireworks at Riverside Park next to the river. In September it's the River Ruckus festival, an event that celebrates the Merrimack and its many uses.

"There are a lot of people who plan their family activities around these festivals," said Vincent Ouellette, the city's recreation director. "The Fourth of July brings a lot of people from out of town as do other festivals. It's unique to have this many festivals showing people what Haverhill is all about. People look forward to these events, year in and year out."

Last year's KidsFEST was transformed into the newly themed Kids ArtsFest and was presented by the Greater Haverhill Chamber of Commerce to highlight local arts.

The event happened on Washington Street in the Riverfront Cultural District and included a full day of live music, local theater, dance performances, the popular "Haverhill Idol" competition and other activities. They included face painting, sand art and martial arts demonstrations.

The annual July 4 celebration is centered around Riverside Park, where last year hundreds of people gathered to watch the fireworks display. Hundreds more gathered in the

parking lot at nearby RiversEdge Plaza, while many others staked out alternate viewing spots, such as on Salem Street in Bradford, where they viewed the fireworks from across the river.

Not everyone watching the fireworks was a land-lubber. Many folks were in boats on the river and turned their excursions into floating parties.

September brings the River Ruckus and its celebration of the mighty Merrimack.

Last year's River Ruckus featured a crew demonstration of competitive rowing as UMass Lowell provided crew boats and festival-goers got to try them out. Donations went to Haverhill High School's new crew program.

The celebration included the Haverhill Rotary Club's annual Rubber Duck Regatta with a \$10,000 cash prize, a Classic Car Show, children's activities, live music, kayak tours, local food vendors and other activities. The event ended with a fireworks display over the river.

The city also hosts road races tied to the river, including the Baldi 5-Mile River Run in May. The route for that race goes through the historic downtown and follows the river to Riverside Park before returning to the downtown. The Bobby Bell Race in October, which also begins downtown, follows River Street along the river and then turns inland before the return trip. Both events draw hundreds of runners and spectators to the downtown.

Throughout the year, several fundraiser walks also follow the river.



ABOVE: Izaiah Rosario of Haverhill paddles in a kayak during a River Ruckus festival.

TIM JEAN/Staff photo



AT LEFT: Thousands of rubber ducks are dumped into the Merrimack River from the Comeau Bridge during the Rubber Duck Regatta, a contest that is part of the River Ruckus celebration.

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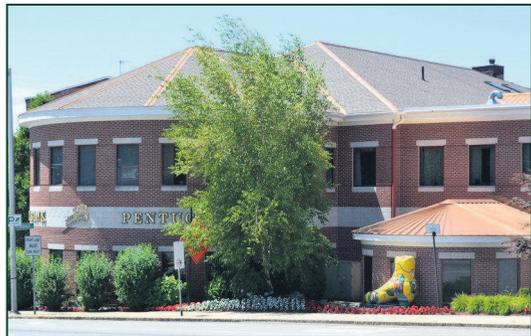
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