

FITCHBURG YOUR STORY: America's Most Colorful River - Julian Morley

["Saxifrage" choral music plays, performed by the Fitchburg State University Choirs]

Prof. Kisha Tracy (intro): Welcome to the Fitchburg State University Perseverantia Podcast network. This is the Fitchburg Your Story series in which Fitchburg State students tell the stories that make our city and university unique.

["Saxifrage" fades out]

[sounds of a rushing river plays over the transition]

Julian Morley: Hello everybody, I'm Julian Morley with Fitchburg State's podcast network. I'm an environmental and earth sciences major here at FSU, and today I want to talk about Fitchburg's very own Nashua River.

For a basic history of the Nashua River, the name comes from the indigenous Nashua people who lived in the area prior to occupation by European settlers. The river was first used as powerful mills in 1734.

[sounds of a rushing river fades in]

The first paper mill was opened in the early 19th century, owned by a man named General Leonard Burbank. From there, the city would continue to grow, relying more and more on the river for power and as a way to dispose of waste.

[sounds of a rushing river fades out]

The Nashua River starts in Fitchburg and then flows through Leominster and Lancaster, before flowing north through central Massachusetts and parts of southern New Hampshire. The Nashua River watershed encompasses an area as far north as Wilton, New Hampshire and as far south as northern Worcester.

Due to little to no regulation prior to the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was not only legal but common practice to dump raw sewage and waste from mills directly into the river. As well, due to the topography of Fitchburg, nearly all runoff drains directly into the Nashua compounding on waste in the river.

The City and the River by Doris Kirkpatrick does an excellent job chronicling the reaction to increasing amounts of sewage in Fitchburg. Incorporated as a city in 1872, which was a bad time given that it was a year before a major financial crisis called the Panic of 1873, the economic crisis left the city with little money, none of which could be spared for building a proper sewage system. Sewage continued to flow into the Nashua and the attitude of Fitchburgers at the time can be summarized with the quote, "Why spend money on a sewage system when the good Lord provided a river."

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Julian Morley (cont'd): This cycle of pollution and environmental damage would continue and multiply for roughly the next century. As Fitchburg grew, so did pollution from factories along the river. A major cause of pollutants continued to be the paper mills along the river, which according to an article in *Sentinel and Enterprise*,

[sounds of a rushing river fades in]

numbered 17 in total at the height of production. At this point, the river's condition was at its worst, described as having a cardboard-like film on the surface of the water and smelling terrible in another article by *Telegram and Gazette*.

[sounds of a rushing river fades out]

Now, my dad grew up in Leominster during the 60s, so I wanted to ask him what he remembered about the river. To quote, "I remember going through there one time, and there must have been a storm. The river was really high and roiling, and it was like this bright blue, like something you would see out of a comic book or something like that. And just every day, every time you drove by there, it would be a different color, and it smelled really bad."

Now, as many issues as the Nashua has today, problems like single-use plastics and other pollutants floating down the river, it is pretty easy to see that it isn't an unnatural color like it used to be. So why did it change?

The answer largely stems from a woman from Groton named Marion Stoddart. She recognized that something had to be done about the rampant pollution of the Nashua River and so she began organizing the community demanding a solution. The Land Conservation Network records how Stoddart began organizing with the community and formed the Nashua River Cleanup Community, which advocated to local and state governments with one message: that the Nashua needed to be transformed from an open sewer to a river that the city could be proud of.

The work that Stoddart put into community organizing and petitioning to different state and local bodies eventually paid off. Her efforts helped lead to the creation of the Massachusetts Clean Waters Act, a state bill that worked to regulate river pollution. In 1969, she founded the Nashua River Watershed Association to monitor and protect the Nashua River. The NRWA is still active today in protecting our natural resources.

A year later, in 1970, Stoddart attended a conference held by the U.S. Department of the Interior on pollution of the Nashua and Merrimack Rivers in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. During the conference, Stoddart spoke along with representatives of the Fitchburg Paper Company and Weyerhaeuser Paper Company, who were both major companies along the river. They discussed what the companies were doing to reduce pollution of the Nashua.

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Julian Morley (cont'd): The agreed-upon solution was to process industrial waste through two municipal wastewater treatment plants. This project took roughly three years and totaled \$17.5 million, which adjusted for inflation would be roughly \$141 million today. During the meeting, Stoddart spoke about the slow timetable and the lack of punishment for companies that broke the rules on water pollution set by the state.

[sounds of a rushing river plays over the transition with some overlap]

Now I have actually visited the wastewater treatment plant over by the Fitchburg Airport as part of another course that I took with the university. And Fitchburg students actually helped to build the treatment plant. I was told stories about how some students would swim in the clean discharge of the plant on hot days.

Now in 1972, the Nashua River Watershed Association released a document titled "Plan for the Nashua River Watershed," which detailed the state of the river at the time, which was described as revolting and sludge-filled, as well as outlining an ideal future for the river. Stoddart and the NRWA saw the Nashua's potential to be restored to a body of water that could be used for recreation, doing things like fishing and boating out on the water.

in the end, Stoddart was successful in her goal.

From an interview for the documentary, *Marion Stoddart: Work of 1000*, Stoddart said about the project, "I want to diverge away from Fitchburg to talk about the greater effects of the environmental movement that Marion Stoddart and the Nashua River are a part of." In 1970, Richard Nixon established the Environmental Protection Agency. Two years later, in 1972, Congress passed the Clean Water Act, which regulated pollution and wastewater treatment federally. This act made it illegal to discharge pollutants directly into bodies of water without government permission.

[sounds of a rushing river plays over the transition with some overlap]

All things considered, one of the better parts of Richard Nixon's presidency.

[sounds of a rushing river fades out]

Now, to wrap up, the work that Marion Stoddart did is important, not only because of local efforts, but how it impacts the whole country. It took people from all over to make establishing regulatory bodies and passing laws on pollution worthwhile for politicians to pursue. This is why Richard Nixon included it as part of his policies is because the average person wanted to see change.

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Julian Morley (cont'd): So, if you want to see something change, often the best way to do it is to organize a group of your peers and petition for it. The efforts made by communities that make up the Nashua Watershed are an important part of the area's heritage, and it is a heritage that should be remembered and defended, especially because of how the most recent administration has targeted organizations like the EPA.

[sounds of a rushing river fades in]

Remember that this is your water to live by and drink out of and we should not return to how it was.

[sounds of a rushing river fades out]

[Perseverantia Network theme fades in]

Prof. Kate Jewell: You're listening to Perseverantia, the Fitchburg State University Podcast Network.

[Perseverantia Network theme fades out]