

Senses of Place: Waterfront Park

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Introduction

Hello and welcome to Senses of Place: a tour through Burlington Soundscapes. I'm Henry and I'm Madi, and in this episode we will take you through Waterfront Park, Burlington's hub for recreation, learning, dining, and experiencing the natural wonders of Lake Champlain.

Here you can take a stroll along the boardwalk, have a picnic in the grass, learn about the lake and local environment at the ECHO, Leahy Center for Lake Champlain, get a taste of a maple creemee - a Vermont staple, and enjoy the bustling sounds around you.

On a sunny spring day, you might be accompanied by the sweet melodies of courting song sparrows. But had you come to the waterfront in the 1800s, their songs would have been drowned out by the constant drone of saws and trains.

History

Burlington's waterfront has been constantly changing throughout time. It all started as a beach, became a hotspot for industry, and now it's a key landmark for recreation, tourism, and education.

As you walk through the Park, you may notice how flat it is, especially if you've walked down the steep slope from Church Street. So, why is it so flat? To better understand this we need to discuss the waterfront's history as the land has had a dynamic past, shifting and growing as new industries came and left.

Under the goals of the Public Trust Doctrine, the Burlington waterfront was expanded so that it could meet the needs of citizens, starting off with the growing lumber industry.

With this increased industrial presence, Burlington became a key port for commercial activities in the mid-1800s and on. The sounds of barges and trains were a constant presence, primarily moving throughout the northeast and Canada. Hundreds of people would spend their days here working on processing and shipments for shipbuilding, home construction, fuel, paper, and potash (to name a few). Piles of wood from the Canadian J.R. Booth Lumber Company were stacked high here before moving on to the rest of New England.

The hungry saws of Burlington's mills ate up much of Vermont's surrounding forests. Alongside a boom in population and commercial agriculture (over sustenance farming), Vermont shifted from a rich tapestry of old growth forests to a mostly pastoral landscape, with some 70% of the land cleared for agriculture or in the early

stages of regeneration from having previously been cleared. However, with time, the lumber industry began to decline due to new tariffs on imported lumber from Canada and the rise of the automobile.

In 1849, railroads were beginning to become the next “big thing” in Vermont. Marshy areas at the waterfront were filled in for more lines with the Rutland and Burlington Railroad. The addition of the railroad to the waterfront, and Vermont as a whole, allowed for more movement of people and products in and out of the state.

However, as timber stores dwindled, the lumber industry at BTV’s waterfront was to be replaced by the petroleum industry, spearheaded by the company: Standard Oil of Burlington. Here, fuel was shipped by railroads, barges, and trucks and stored in large above ground tanks from Oakledge Park, 2 miles to the south, all the way to North Beach, running on the same path as the modern Island Line Trail. However, with this history, Burlington faced many challenges about what the waterfront’s future might hold and how to deal with the residual effects of industry’s long-term dominance at the site.

Nevertheless, the waterfront began to transform. The remnants of industrial activities were being cleaned up by the city, a new shoreline and boardwalk were created with the addition of clean fill at the site, and the Burlington Community Boathouse was constructed in 1988. Shortly after that, in 1991, Waterfront Park was completed. After a long history of using the area for industrial purposes, Burlington citizens and visitors finally have a place to relax, enjoy the company of family and friends, and immerse themselves in the natural beauty that Lake Champlain and Vermont has to offer.

Environmental Concerns Related to History

We now know the history behind the land use of the waterfront. But after hearing about the land use and natural resource processing that took place there, we wonder: what were the effects of these processes?

A major case study for the waterfront and its history of pollution comes from a place called the Pine Street Barge Canal. Just a few minutes south of Waterfront Park, the canal and pond extend from the lake inland. Today they are surrounded by lush marshland protected by the Environmental Protection Agency’s Institutional Controls. You can hear the harsh “conklaree” of red-winged blackbirds in the tall, waving shrubs, gray squirrels and chipmunks alike dance through the masting oaks. A beaver scurries into its den as a biker rolls across the nearby footbridge. The Barge Canal is a success story of the waterfront, but this success did not come easy.

For nearly two centuries, the canal was an example of the industrial burden that was put on the waterfront’s natural landscape. For decades, lumber yards then coal plants dumped waste onto the ground or straight into the water. A lack of plants and natural filtration systems allowed for runoff to pick up contaminants and drain straight into the lake from the waterfront as it was filled in and expanded. The Moran coal plant dumped toxic chemicals and factory waste straight into the canal and nearby wetlands for 60 years. In 1985, spearheaded by Mayor Bernie Sanders, the Waterfront Development Plan took effect to recognize and remediate the

environmental, ecological, and health hazards posed by the Barge Canal as well as similar projects along the waterfront. In 1991, the Trust for Public Land worked with the City of Burlington to purchase 45 acres on the waterfront where the Central Vermont Railway once operated, and set it aside as protected land as the waterfront we now know was being built.

Wildlife Presence

Waterfront Park, created and greened with major help from the city, now supports some of the most urban wildlife on Lake Champlain. A series of lawns, bushes, and trees are a playground for squirrels and birds, and on a nice, calm day in the summer, a symphony of resident and migratory birds makes for a great listening experience. In warmer months and into the fall, keep an ear out for locals such as dark-eyed juncos, blue jays, ring-billed gulls, song sparrows, white-throated wrens, Carolina wrens, and American Crows.

Conclusion

We hope you have enjoyed this quick tour through Waterfront Park's history, environmental challenges, and wildlife. As you've heard, Waterfront Park has had a long and winding history with the growth and decline of the lumber, railroad, and petroleum industries. Now, it's a place to relax, listen to the sounds of the water, wind, and wildlife, and enjoy the company of friends and family.

For more information about things to do and amenities, you can check out our General Information page.

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- Digital versions of signs:

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