



Advocates Urge Communities in Massachusetts and Connecticut to Embrace Housatonic River

By Ryan Caron King



Schuyler Thomson paddles down the Housatonic River.

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As Schuyler Thomson lead a group of paddlers down the Housatonic River in northwest Connecticut, he squinted through the morning sunlight on the water.

There was a time when Thomson, a championship paddler and canoe craftsman by trade, might have been the only one out on the Housatonic. Waste and chemicals have kept people out of and away from the river for almost a century.

"People have turned their backs on the river," Thomson said between strokes.

In a ten-day trek down the river from its source in the Berkshires to its outlet on Long Island Sound, Thomson and members of the Housatonic Valley Association looked to bring communities along the river back to it.

The HVA's Source to Sound trip, along with a series of celebrations along the riverside, highlighted the river's amenities: peaceful boat rides, ample fishing, and -- because of public avoidance of its once-polluted banks -- isolation from the busy hubbub of the state's suburbs.

From the seat of his canoe, Thomson recalled the historical importance of the Housatonic as a source of energy and transportation, as well as inspiration for artists and writers who visited its banks.

He referred to an allegory used by author Chard Powers Smith in the book *The Housatonic: Puritan River*: that the river represented a battleground between intellectualism and industrialism.

"There was one period where there was a tremendous burst of literary achievement in this valley in the first half of the 19th century," Thomson said. "But that was soon put to route by [a] force of the devil: the iron age. And for years, right up until 1923, there were blast furnaces going day and night. Palls of great black smoke. Every now and then, a great burst of orange would light up the sky as they opened the gates and let the molten iron into the channels."

The majority of PCBs in the Housatonic River are concentrated upstream of the Woods Pond dam in Lenox, within a ten-mile stretch.

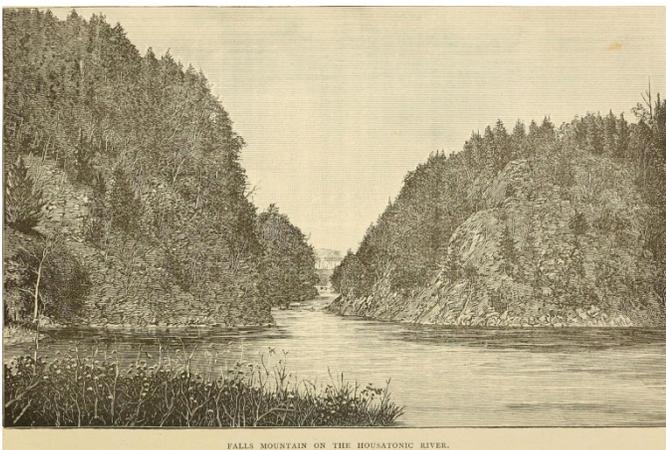
Among other prolific authors who found inspiration in the Housatonic -- with Melville and Hawthorne among those ranks -- was Great Barrington native W.E.B. Du Bois, who had spent time on the river growing up.

In 1930, Du Bois called out against the river's neglect, in a speech at his high school's annual alumni meeting:

We have crossed it with bridges of unbelievable ugliness. We have choked the flow of its waters, and we have done this not only by filling up the river with refuse, but by denuding the guardian hillsides of their trees and shutting off the brooks.

Through the 20th century, towns and companies freely dumped waste into the river.

One of those companies was General Electric, who from the 1930s to 1970s dumped polychlorinated biphenyls -- a chemical compound known as PCBs -- that were banned in the late '70s and now are linked to cancer.



Book engraving of Falls Mountain gorge on the Housatonic River in present-day New Milford Connecticut. Site of a seventeenth century Paugussett Native American fishing village. Credit Rev. Samuel Orcutt, A History of the Old Town of Stratford and City of Bridgeport Connecticut, Volume 1. / Fairfield County Historical Society

Despite the lengthy cleanup process, Thomson said that there has been a noticeable change in the river's ecosystem over the years.

"The water is certainly a little cleaner than it used to be," Thomson said. "You see birds and fish now that you never saw before. And those are the kinds of animals that don't inhabit dirty water."

HVA Berkshire Director Dennis Regan said the difference is especially noticeable along the river in Pittsfield where vegetation has regrown after the river and the wildlife surrounding were dug up to remove the chemical waste.



*A heron on the Housatonic.
Credit Ryan Caron King / WNPR*

The PCBs sitting in the riverbeds and floodplains of the Housatonic, while complex and hard to break apart, aren't as tangible as other pollutants that once changed the smell, or color of water, Regan said.

"When people are paddling, we tell them the water is safe, just not to go in the mud," Regan said.

In 2000, GE agreed to remediate the first two miles of the river in Pittsfield. Now, the company is butting heads with the EPA on how to clean the rest of the river.

The majority of PCBs now in the Housatonic are concentrated upstream of the Woods Pond dam in Lenox, within a ten-mile stretch. But Regan said flooding and storms could push PCBs further down the river. The EPA says PCBs have been detected as far down the Housatonic as Connecticut.

"PCB supply keeps getting forced downstream," Regan said. "So I say, get rid of the supply."



*A view from the front of Schuyler Thomson's canoe as the group sets out on the Housatonic.
Credit Ryan Caron King / WNPR*



*Out on the Housatonic River.
Credit Ryan Caron King / WNPR*

Regan's preferred course of action would be dredging those next ten miles – possibly more – for a complete PCB cleanup. The EPA's Rest of River plan includes dredging, but isn't as thorough as some environmental advocates would like.

Conversely, in a letter to the EPA, GE said in February that the current plan – which would cost GE roughly \$613 million -- was "arbitrary and capricious," and that there were remediation less costly alternatives that would be less destructive to the river.

Regan admitted that full remediation via dredging won't look pretty. He said GE promotional material emphasized dredging would disrupt the natural aesthetics of the Housatonic. It isn't inaccurate, he said, but doesn't account for the long-term welfare of the river, and the people they're encouraging to use it.

"All critters in the habitat are contaminated with PCBs. Waterfowl eat vegetation, consume dirt with PCBs. You can't eat the fish all the way down through Connecticut," Regan said.



Contaminated fish are common in many bodies of water in the region -- there's a once-meal-a-month limit on parts of the Quinnipiac River due to PCBs, for example. But the Housatonic's concentration of PCB contamination puts all fish and waterfowl off-limits for eating on the Massachusetts section of the river, with similar restrictions in Connecticut.

The paddlers stop on the shore to talk to two previous trip leaders, who drove to meet the group en route to Falls Village, Connecticut. Credit Ryan Caron King / WNPR

The wildlife, while for the most part inedible, was still enjoyable to the paddlers on the HVA Source to Sound trip.

Just past the Route 44 overpass on the river, Thomson observed a heron flying across the water. Another paddler remarked that one had followed their group down the river the day before.

To draw more people to the riverside, the HVA held events and educational programming in conjunction with their Housatonic trip – one of them involved loading a crew of middle school students into Thomson's recently-built war canoe.

"I think people are becoming more aware that this is an asset, rather than a liability," Thomson said as a Housatonic Railroad train whistle blew in the distance – another remnant of the historic Housatonic Valley that's run near the river since the mid-1800s.