

1 How long does it take for nature to take back what is her own? The Old Mill Trail from Hinsdale to Dalton winds its way through the woodlands with only a few traces of the bustling industry that employed thousands of people and churned out the cloth for everything from skirts and shirts to blankets that kept armies warm. First diverted in 1772 for a sawmill, the river powered six textile factories in Hinsdale until 1930 when the last mill shut down. It took almost a century for nature to reclaim these woods, and the leafy solitude hides the traces of human activity.

2 You are standing over the East Branch of the Housatonic River. Just a few miles upstream is the Hinsdale Flats, designated an Area of Critical Environmental Concern because it has excellent water quality. The wetlands, floodplains and surrounding uplands support an outstanding variety of natural communities and wildlife, including six state-listed rare species.

3 The photo below was taken from about this point and shows the small reservoir formed by the dam built downstream by the Plunketts to power the Lower Valley Mill.



East Branch in Dalton, circa 1890.

4 Here the soil was exposed when the dam was breached and the reservoir drained. Invasive plants such as Japanese barberry, common buckthorn, Asian honey-suckle and multiflora rose quickly became established. These were treated and removed in 2017 with funding provided by MassWildlife to improve the wildlife habitat of this river corridor. Volunteer work days are scheduled to help continue this work.

5 Up the hill you will see the remains of an old car, a 1938 Oldsmobile. Built after the last of the Hinsdale mills closed, this Oldsmobile was heralded in a publicity brochure as the "first-choice family car... first choice for roominess, convenience and style."

6 You are standing on the edge of where the mill reservoir once was. Held back by the dam, this reservoir supplied water to the Lower Valley Mill built in 1851 by Charles H. Plunkett. You will see parts of this mill's foundation a short way down this trail. Charles grew up in nearby Lenox, so you may wonder why he came here. Opportunity, plain and simple. He had heard of this branch of the Housatonic River but most of it was under control of the Cranes and Westons in Dalton for their papermaking businesses. So, he ventured farther upstream and came here to Hinsdale. There were already a few smaller mills—sawmills mostly—that used the water power. He bought out one sawmill near the center of the village in 1831 and started a woolen mill. In 1851 he partnered with his brother-in-law Charles Kittredge, and the success of the Lower Valley Mill allowed them to build a second, bigger mill just a few years later.



Charles H. Plunkett

7 Notice the concrete foundation you are standing on and the trench below that seems to continue down the valley. This trench housed what is known as a penstock—a technical term for a pipe that delivers water to a mill. Constructed in 1905 by Zenas and Winthrop Crane, this penstock conveyed water through a 4-foot metal pipe from the reservoir all the way to the Renfrew Mill in Dalton, about a mile downstream. The water powered a turbine that generated electricity for Crane mills in Dalton. Capturing the water in pipes for delivery to the mills offered several advantages over simply re-directing the river. First, pipes delivered water even in the freezing winter temperatures of the Berkshires. Second, the pipes helped increase the water pressure to run the turbine generators that replaced the water wheels in turning the gears and belts attached to the machines.

Reference this guide to the numbered posts along the trail to learn about the **human** and **natural** history while enjoying the trail.

The Housatonic Valley Association (HVA) is the watershed association for the Housatonic River. With support from partners and volunteers, HVA originally built this trail and continues to help maintain it. It is called the Old Mill Trail because of the remnants of mill history you see along the way. The trail is now owned and co-managed by the Berkshire Natural Resources Council.



Photo by Gabrielle K. Murphy

Interpretive Guide



Dalton | Hinsdale

This brochure was funded in part by the Hinsdale-Peru Cultural Council and the Central Berkshire Fund of the Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation.



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8 You are standing on the remains of the old mill dam. This dam supplied water power to the Lower Valley Mill and also to the downstream Renfrew Mill through the penstock. This short trail dead-ends at the site of the former Plunkett dam, which burst in 1936 and sent a wall of water downstream. Fortunately, no loss of life occurred. The East Branch of the Housatonic River drops 257 feet from the center of Hinsdale to Dalton and powered many mills along its length for over 100 years.

9 Most families that worked at the Lower Valley Mill lived just up the hill on Jericho Road in houses rented from Mr. Plunkett, who owned the mill. Entire families would work long hours at the mill—fathers, mothers, and children. The rent for houses would be taken out of salaries that were paid once a year. Mr. Plunkett also owned a mill store that stood near the start of this trail. He made all his workers do their shopping there. What they got paid often did not cover both the rent and the store accounts, which tied folks to employment at the mill.



Lower Valley Mill ruins



Photo by Gabrielle K. Murphy

10 You're standing at the corner of the Lower Valley Mill foundation. Look for the other corner to your right and notice that the foundation is quite narrow. This mill building is the building on the right in the photo of the Lower Valley Mill ruins. Before electricity, mill workers had to rely on natural lighting to operate the equipment. Many windows were placed along the length of the two sides of the building to allow for maximum light from both sides to enter the workspaces.

11 Look towards the river and notice the foundation of the second of two Plunkett woolen mills that once stood here, built sometime after 1887. The Plunkett mills produced broadcloth, Union cassimeres, and satinets, and employed about 250 mill workers. The workers put in around 60 hours a week with only Sundays off. It was dangerous to operate equipment that worked so fast. Mr. Plunkett's son, Thomas, had his arm crushed in one of the mill's machines. Children, with their tiny hands, worked as runners, moving between the equipment to replace bobbins.

12 As you continue along the trail you are walking where the 4-foot penstock used to be. Notice how the trail is set down in this open tunnel.

13 The East Branch is a healthy cold water fish resource that supports multiple kinds of fish requiring cold and highly oxygenated water, such as the native longnose sucker,

slimy sculpin, and brook trout. This river is also stocked with trout in the spring. Not only is this water good for fish, but it's excellent for making paper, too. In 1801, Zenas Crane looked all over Berkshire County and decided to build the first Crane paper mill in Dalton along the East Branch due to its excellent water quality and mineral content. Since 1879, Crane has been the sole producer of US currency paper.

14 Notice the asphalt channel that is coming from Rt. 8 above you. When it rains, motor oil, soil, dog waste, trash and even heat is picked up and carried down this asphalt channel and right into the river. Stormwater runoff is a major pollution problem. You can help: pick up your pet waste, fix any vehicle leaks quickly, and wash your car on the lawn (or at a car wash).

15 If you look under your feet you'll notice that you are walking on top of a large concrete block, which is part of the penstock that began all the way back at the dam ruins. In fact, this isn't even where it ends! Continue carefully across the street and along the second half of the trail to discover where this incredible feat of human engineering terminates.

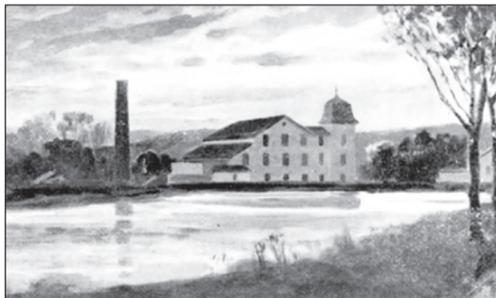
16 About twenty years ago, an HVA volunteer suggested that this stretch of the East Branch was perfect for a riverside trail. From that small seed, lots of hard work, and community support, this trail became a reality in 2010. As you continue along the next portion of the trail, you will have the unique opportunity to experience the beauty of the river by walking on a trail built out of rocks right at the water's edge. This incredible rock work is the handiwork of the Peter S. Jensen & Associates professional trail crew.

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17 Look up: above you are transmission lines. Now look at the vegetation below. It is mostly shrubs and brambles. Routine maintenance of the vegetation under the transmission lines has reduced the amount of shade on the river, resulting in warmer water which is less beneficial for this river's ecology. Vegetation is also important for holding the soil along the river bank. In 2016, Wahconah High School students planted willow, dogwood, elderberry and sumac to improve shade and reduce soil erosion. BNRC continues to manage this stretch of trail to improve its wildlife value and ensure that the electric utility company does not need to apply herbicide to keep woody sapling growth at bay.

18 During the last ice age, approximately 12,000 to 18,000 years ago, this rock and most of those you see around you were deposited by glaciers. The type of rock seen here is most likely a granite gneiss. Though originally extruded as an igneous granite, intense heat and pressure metamorphosed it to form the bands of color you see. The reddish color is due to the presence of iron.

19 Railroad tracks lie just a few yards away up the hill. Getting finished wool cloth to markets in New York and Boston proved challenging to Hinsdale mill owners. They lobbied the Western Railroad Company surveyors to route the new line from Boston to Albany through Hinsdale and Dalton, a major engineering feat.



Above: A painting of the Renfrew Mill

Right: Hinsdale Brothers Mill, Hinsdale



20 Take a close look at the bark of this native black cherry tree, which looks a bit like "burnt cornflakes." Look up—you might catch sight of a black bear feeding on the small black fruits and leaves in its crown. Bears will climb up a cherry tree and find a place to sit, then pull branches toward them, breaking them to feed. The black cherries ripen in early summer and are a food source for many mammals and birds, not just the black bear.

21 The supports you see in the river once supported the penstock. This is the same penstock that started back at the dam ruins.

22 Here you finally see the penstock, the pipe that was used to carry water from above the dam all the way to a turbine in the Renfrew Mill further down river. The Renfrew Mill, formerly the Birmingham Mill (1864) (re-built of stone in 1870 after fire destroyed the original mill in 1868) was repurposed in

1870 as a cotton mill by James Renfrew. He also owned several cotton mills in Adams. The Renfrew Mill building still stands, but since 1986, it has been known as the Stone Mill Condominiums. Please take a closer look at the pipe but take care—some say they have seen a bear hibernating in it.

The trail ends here. Please retrace your steps back to the trailhead. Thank you for visiting the Old Mill Trail.

