

*A Short History of  
the Farmington River  
and the Quest for a National  
Wild & Scenic River designation*

*By David Sinish*

*A publication by the Farmington River  
Coordinating Committee*



*Photo by Laura Hart*

*West Branch Farmington River*

## The Wild & Scenic Farmington River, *West Branch*

The 1950's and 1960's marked the peak of the big dam-building era in the United States. At that time, the country was also experiencing rapid degradation of its water resources due to municipal and industrial effluent being released into the nation's rivers. Many waterways and the fish in them were toxic, rendering them unusable by surrounding communities. Populations of aquatic species were declining. People were being relocated from their communities due to rampant dam building.

The numerous proposed dams caught the attention of many citizens. This eventually led to a presidential commission recommending the nation protect wild rivers and scenic rivers from development that would substantially change their free-flowing nature and values.

John and Frank Craighead, brothers from Montana and well-known wildlife biologists and conservationists, led the fight against the Spruce Park dam on the Middle Fork of the Flathead River. The concept of "wild rivers" was first introduced by John Craighead at a Montana State University conference in 1957. The concept was well received and led to a Presidential Commission. Eleven years later President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act into law on October 2, 1968. It is said that First Lady, Lady Bird Johnson was a great influence. The Act established the **National Wild and Scenic Rivers System** to protect and enhance rivers found to be regionally and nationally significant.

In 2018 there were nationwide celebrations of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this most significant Act. As of August 2018, the National System protects over 12,700 miles of 209 rivers in 40 states and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. This is less than one-quarter of one percent of the nation's rivers, which flow over 3.5 million miles across the United States. By comparison, more than 75,000 large dams across the country have modified at least 600,000 miles, or about 17%, of American rivers.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sappenfield, B. (2018) Retrieved from <https://www.rivers.gov/wsr-act.php>



To bring this National effort down to our local scale, we take a look at the Farmington River and its story of becoming a Wild & Scenic River. It starts with the need for water as a resource.



In the Farmington River Watershed the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) has a major influence on water flows and its distribution.

As Hartford grew from settlement to port city to manufacturing hub, water was first taken from the Connecticut River. Pipes to the Lord's Hill reservoir were installed in 1855. When germ theory was recognized a purer source was needed and Trout Brook was tapped. The Hartford Water Commission became the Metropolitan District Commission in 1929. The history of the MDC is chronicled in Kevin Murphy's book *Water for Hartford – the story of Hartford Water Works and the Metropolitan District Commission*.<sup>2</sup>

Continued growth meant more reservoirs and more miles of pipes. By the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> century there were many downstream manufacturers

<sup>2</sup> Murphy, K. (2010) Wesleyan University Press.

that relied on the Farmington River to drive their water wheels and generators. To compensate for the loss of water flow from the first MDC dam on the Nepaug River (1917), the Compensating Reservoir was constructed on the East Branch in 1920. This reservoir was subsequently named Lake McDonough. Eleven years later the Barkhamsted Reservoir was constructed, also on the East Branch, to become the main water source for the MDC. It contains 30 billion gallons of water. As a compensation for the lost water flow from the East Branch, the West Branch Reservoir (Hogback) with the Goodwin Dam was constructed in 1960. The Goodwin Dam provides hydroelectricity. The Army Corps of Engineers had been watching the potential of West Branch floods and after the devastating flood in August of 1955, constructed the Colebrook River Reservoir.

The current system is a marvel of engineering with untreated surface water from miles away moved by gravity and pipe to the treatment facilities in Bloomfield and West Hartford. Fifty million gallons of water are treated a day for 100,000 customers and 400,000 people.

The water releases from these dams are decided by the Army Corps of Engineers, CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, the MDC and downstream commercial users. The Farmington is a managed river.

In the fall of 1981, a couple of members of the Farmington River Watershed Association (FRWA) board met with the MDC over access to the Barkhamsted/Lake McDonough Reservoir. It became known that the MDC was putting forth a referendum to provide funding of a tunnel and aqueduct to enable West Branch water to flow into the East Branch system. The West Branch in Hartland is a few miles from the East Branch Barkhamsted Reservoir. This tunnel/aqueduct had been proposed by some at the MDC after completion of the Hogback (West Branch) Reservoir.

FRWA Board President Culver Modisette led the charge against the proposed diversion tunnel. An impassioned outdoorsman and an advertising executive, he was perfectly suited to lead the charge. Consider there was no internet and social media at the time. Print

newspaper and radio were the only media. The question was what would happen to the West Branch water users if the water was diverted to the East Branch? No one knew the answers. Concerns about reduced water used for sewage assimilation, recreation, provision of habitat, and support of property values were raised. No one knew the answers.

It is important to know that the referendum was voted on by the MDC member towns of Hartford, Bloomfield, Newington, Wethersfield, Windsor, East Hartford, Rocky Hill and West Hartford (the recipient towns). The upstream towns (the donor towns) could not vote. Residents living in New Hartford could not vote, but those in East Hartford could.

We all held our breaths on election night and exhaled a huge breath of relief when the plan was defeated. That was in 1981. What was there to do?

We knew this tunnel would be proposed again. I can remember standing in the rain with a few guys fretting over what could be done. The farfetched thought was to look at the Federal Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968. This Act had been used in the West to protect rivers mostly on Federal land. How could that possibly be used for a river flowing through New England towns and countryside?

With the great assistance of Nancy Johnson, our Representative in Congress, a study committee was formed. And study we did. User surveys, land surveys, economic and hydrological studies, fisheries studies, trips to Washington, D.C. for testimony, and countless meetings. Some have said that the Farmington is the most studied river in the United States. After eleven years of meetings, agreement to a Memorandum of Understanding, ratification of the Management Plan, and development of zoning protection, thirteen years after the referendum, designation for the upper 14 miles in Connecticut was achieved on August 26 of 1994. The segment runs from the Goodwin Dam in Hartland to the downstream most border of New Hartford and Canton.



*Photo by Laura Hart*

In 2019 this segment was extended 1.1 miles to the confluence with the Nepaug River in Canton at the time of designation of the Lower Farmington River and Salmon Brook.

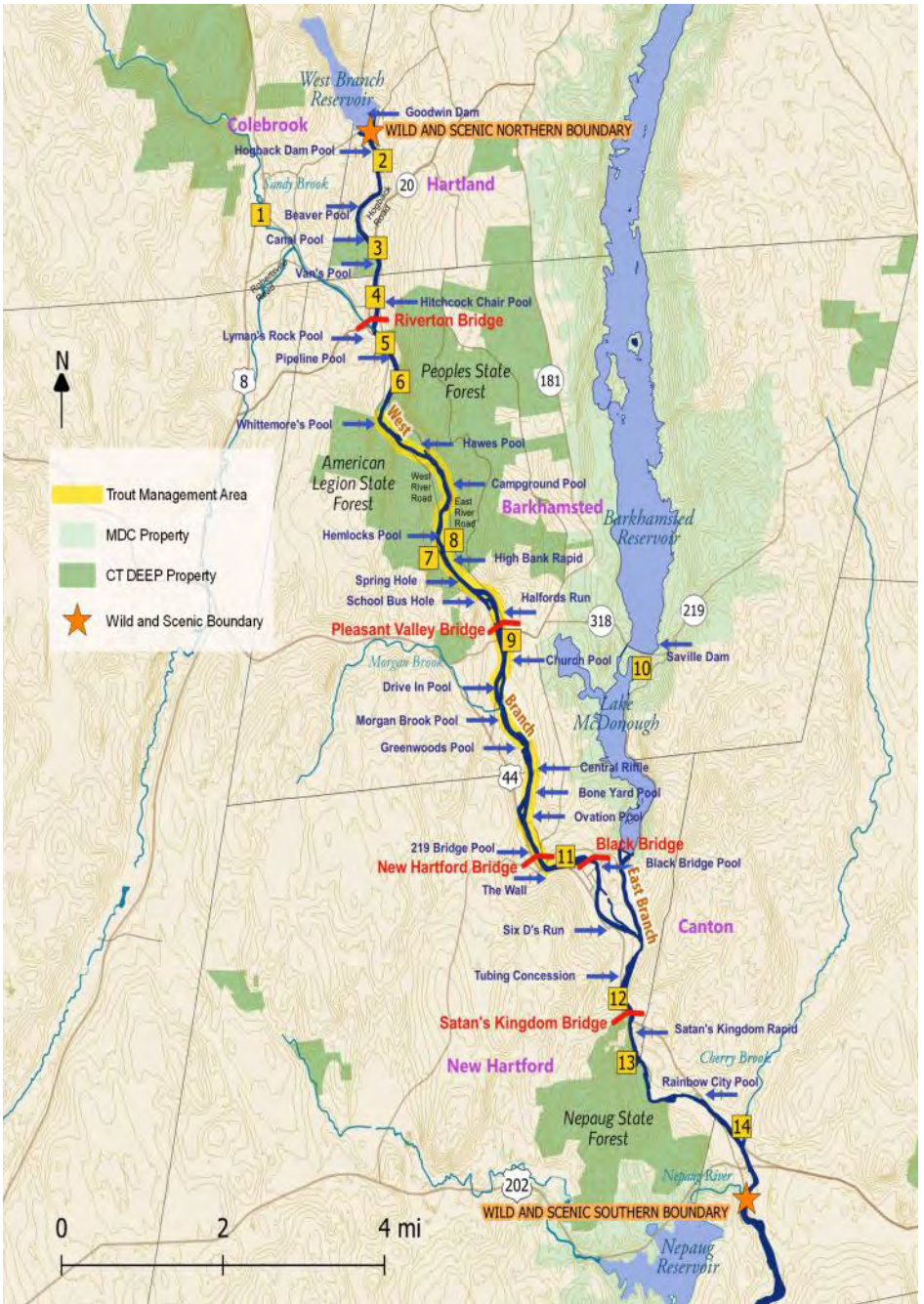
The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act includes classification for Wild, Scenic, and Recreational rivers. The Farmington is a Recreational River, as it flows through some development and is easily accessible by road. More importantly, the Farmington is the first Partnership Wild & Scenic River (PWSR) in the United States and has become the model for 14 other rivers on the East Coast that flow through public and private lands. PWSRs, under the umbrella of the National Park Service, make local governments responsible for developing and enforcing local zoning regulations. The National Park Service reviews and acts on projects that require Federal permits or funding. There is local control with Federal regulatory review. There is no taking of the land and no uniformed Park Rangers.

Prior to designation a management plan must be developed. Required of all partnership rivers is the establishment of a coordinating committee. The Farmington River Coordinating Committee (FRCC) is responsible for organizing activities on the



*Photo by Laura Hart*





Map of 2019 Wild & Scenic boundaries. For more details please see [www.farmingtonriver.org](http://www.farmingtonriver.org) Map by *Stephan Bastrzycki*.

river and implementing the Upper Farmington River Management Plan. The FRCC comprises representatives from each of the five river fronting towns of Barkhamsted, Canton, Colebrook, Hartland, and New Hartford as well as representatives from the Farmington River Watershed Association, the Metropolitan District Commission, the CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, the National Park Service, and the Farmington River Anglers Association. The FRCC embodies the important partnership among the riverfront towns and others to provide stewardship of this fourteen-mile segment.

The Management Plan was developed in 1993 by the Farmington River Study Committee with extensive input from citizens and officials in the five riverfront towns and nonprofit and governmental entities who have a stake in the health of the river. The Management Plan was updated in 2013 by the FRCC with much public input and approval by all members of the FRCC. There is a wealth of information in the Management Plan. In addition to helping develop the Plan, member towns voluntarily adopted a 100 foot protective zoning overlay district prior to Wild and Scenic designation, and thus made a commitment to honor the protections of the Plan.

The river was designated because of the Outstanding Resource Values of Recreation, Wildlife, Fisheries, Historic and Scenic. Funding comes from the Federal government. Public full committee and subcommittee meetings are held monthly.

One of the roles of the FRCC is education and outreach. There are several programs such as the group of River Stewards working along the river during the summer, the development of websites, the production of educational material, including the Farmington River Water Trail brochure and the Farmington River Quilt. Another role is to assist municipalities, land trusts and organizations with funding for design services, water quality monitoring, invasive plant control management, legal fees for land preservation, and infrastructural changes. The stabilization of the West River Road in Barkhamsted was one of the first projects.

Visit the website to learn more and access the management plans. Also visit our partner sites for current information on river conditions and events (see back page 'Resources' for links).

It goes without saying that the protection and preservation of the upper 14 miles of the Farmington has been magnificently enhanced by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968. But it does not end there.

There is an initiative from American Rivers and American Whitewater Association to protect 5,000 more miles of river in the United States. This includes 62 miles of the Lower Farmington River and Salmon Brook, which received designation in 2019. As of September 2019, the administrative structure of the designation is being developed.



*High Bank Rapids* by Susan Cane, Canaan, CT  
Farmington River Quilt, Section 10. Photo by Tom Cameron

# *Resources*

## **Farmington River Coordinating Committee**

100 East River Road  
Pleasant Valley, CT 06063  
860-379-0282 [www.farmingtonriver.org](http://www.farmingtonriver.org)

## **Farmington River Steward Program**

[www.farmingtonriversteward.org](http://www.farmingtonriversteward.org)

## **Farmington River Quilt Project**

[www.farmingtonriverquilt.org](http://www.farmingtonriverquilt.org)

## **Farmington River Watershed Association**

749 Hopmeadow Street  
Simsbury, CT 06070  
860-658-4442 [www.frwa.org](http://www.frwa.org)

## **Lower Farmington River/Salmon Brook Wild & Scenic Study**

[www.lowerfarmingtonriver.org](http://www.lowerfarmingtonriver.org)



**FARMINGTON RIVER  
COORDINATING COMMITTEE**

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