

**Remarks by Kermit Williams, Wilton Select Board, at the opening of the Wilton Riverwalk  
Stony Brook Trail on Sunday, June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

Stony Brook is one of the most common names for a water body in America. There are three Stony Brooks in Massachusetts alone, including one that flows through Boston that they buried in the 1800s. I imagine that many people exploring looked down through clear water at the rocks along the bottom of a stream they discovered, and said, "That's a stony brook!"

Of course, here along the Riverwalk, the stones aren't so visible. But if you go farther north, nearer to where the brook drains Winn Mountain and other high parts of Lyndeborough, you will see lots of stones. New Hampshire has plenty of them. We're not called the Granite State for nothing.

Stony Brook has flowed along this path, more or less, on its way to the Atlantic Ocean, for eons. The reason that this part of Wilton is here at all is because of Stony Brook and its big brother, the Souhegan. For early settlers, being near water was critical. First, to drink and wash, next to provide food. There are fish in Stony Brook today, but only because the state of New Hampshire dumps them in just upstream of here periodically. They are pulled out by eager anglers pretty fast.

The next step was using the power of the water to get work done. All along Wilton's rivers and streams, mills were built. First there were sawmills. Plenty of trees to cut down to size. There might have been a gristmill, too, but there was a lot more wood than wheat. As Wilton grew, and technology advanced, enterprising manufacturers saw the power of the water and wanted to control it. There were two dams on this part of Stony Brook alone. If you were here a hundred years ago, you would have seen a millpond here. The growth of the east village of Wilton, and even the railroad coming here, was directly tied to the waterpower that flowed here at the confluence of Stony Brook and the Souhegan River.

Over time, manufacturers switched to more controllable sources of power. Rivers are finicky – they might dry up, or flood, or be choked with ice. Steam and then electricity were more reliable. The rivers became just an obstacle. They needed bridges. Wilton was flooded more than once, and even today, we are told by the state Dam Bureau that the Sand Hill Road Reservoir dam, which is two miles from here, could fail and the resulting water release would race down Stony Brook to right where you are standing and flood Forest Road to several feet.

But in general, we control the rivers. Today, you drive across the bridge over here and don't even think about the miracle that got you across quickly and without getting wet. So we went from needing the river to hating the river to ignoring the river. That is where we are today.

Starting with surveys and a town-wide charrette, the economic development team recognized that many people in Wilton thought there should be more focus on the rivers. The flowing lifeblood of the east village in the 1800s had become just a background. Some people forgot – or never paid attention – that there was even a river in downtown. Changing that started with the first phase of the Riverwalk – across the brook around the police station parking lot. That project was partially a revival of a park that

was there long before the police station, and also some new ideas. One of the landscape architecture firms that helped with the charrette was hired, and drew up beautiful plans for a downtown-wide Riverwalk. It's clear – it's been proven by other towns that have developed around their downtown rivers – that when people really see the water, they like it. Making the stream accessible brings people together, provides recreation, and encourages them to linger. That need and love for water is still deep in our souls.

Riverwalk projects are expensive, and we realized that the only way it could be done is a bite at a time, as opportunities came along. Jennifer spotted the AARP grant opportunity, and did a great job to win something where only a few percent of applicants had their projects funded. This work got done with a little bit of grant money and a whole lot of volunteer time and determination. So today, another section of that Riverwalk vision is completed, and we move closer to a future where the rivers can once again be economic lifeblood for Wilton.