A Natural History of Mary Brown's Dingle

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The name "Mary Brown's Dingle" recognizes both the woman who donated the land and also reveals something about the land's topography. A "dingle" is an old English word that refers to a small, shady dell or hollow, and this one was sold to the City's Conservation Commission in 1983 by Mary Frances Brown. The price was a dollar, with a provision that the land be used for "passive recreation and conservation purposes, and for the protection, preservation, promotion and development of the natural resources."

Mary Brown's Dingle lies on the southeast side of Round Hill, a landscape that has played an important role in Northampton's cultural and economic history. The only public access to the conservation area begins at the end of Glendale Avenue. Built in the 19th century, the street's name probably was chosen because of the pretty little, park-like valley behind it. The word "glendale" means fertile, low-lying arable land. This photo shows the dingle in the 1950s.

Brown's connection with the dingle began in 1959 when she moved into the house at 141 Crescent Street. From her back

windows, she could look out over this patch of woods and a decade later, she had the chance to buy it. The next year, in 1970, Brown moved away and sold her Crescent Street home. But for some reason, she held on to this one and half acre triangle. When she finally donated it to the Conservation Commission, she was living in Brickyard, New Jersey. Why she donated it, who she was, or even when she died has been impossible to find out. Today, as far as we know, Mary Brown is remembered only through her name's association with this small conservation area.

Changes Since 1993

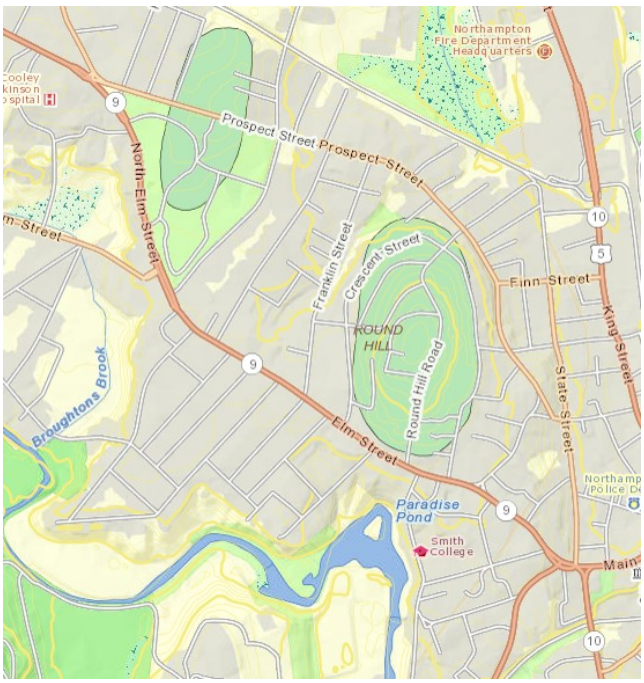
In the twenty years since I first inventoried Mary Brown's Dingle, it has undergone remarkable and unwelcome changes. The narrow path that used to thread up the sewerline right-of-way to the woods has all but disappeared, partly from disuse and partly because it has been overtaken by invasive non-native plants. Of these, the worst is Japanese knotweed. Two decades ago, it was present at this site in a few discrete clumps. Today, not only are the patches bigger, but there are also a lot more of them. This one species has spread throughout much

Above, Japanese knotweed blocks the former path and the view of the wetland. Below, a close up of knotweed in fruit.

As this 1895 map shows, the dingle, which is located where it reads "W. 2.", historically received enough water from the south-east edge of Childs Park (then owned by Henry Watson) and the springs on Round Hill to create an open brook. All of the water from Childs Park and the other springs in the area have since been piped and re-routed. Mary Brown's Dingle, however, still has enough groundwater and drainage seeping out at its upper section to create the wetland that covers a third of the property.

After sheeting through the wetland, the water goes northeast under Prospect Street, then under the bike path, and into the Barrett Street Marsh Conservation Area. From there, the water has been routed north, flowing through yet more ditches and pipes, until it eventually daylights near the mouth of Slough Brook and into the Connecticut River.

In 1792, the springs on Round Hill became the city's first water supply, when some of them were tapped and conveyed via hollowed-out logs to a limited number of businesses and residences in Northampton's downtown. The hill was also the site of town picnics in the early 1800s, and later it became the home for the Northampton School for Boys, which became the Round Hill Water Cure and Hotel, which later became the Clarke School for the Deaf. During the 19th century, Round Hill also became one of Northampton's most prestigious neighborhoods.



The presence of springs on Round Hill is due to its geologic history. It is a drumlin (shown in deeper green, with lighter green representing protected areas), a north-south trending glacial landform with an underlying core of compact till. Till, made up of unsorted rock, gravel, sand, and clay and located only a few feet below the surface is pretty much impermeable. Rainwater soaks through the ground until it hits the till and then, as groundwater, runs downslope until it eventually discharges as springs and seeps.

Child's Park, to the north, is also underlain by a drumlin.

of the site and now covers large sections of the slopes and forms a barrier along the wetter portion of the property.

Above, multiflora rose in fruit and privet in flower; below, the patch of pachysandra as you enter the property.

But knotweed is hardly the only problematic invader. During the last twenty years, garlic mustard, lesser celandine, privet and wintercreeper have arrived and proliferated. Multiflora rose has spread from the uplands into the wetland. Japanese maple and winged euonymus have established on the slopes. More catalpa and Norway maple have taken hold. Asiatic bittersweet has spread.

Japanese knotweed blocks the pathway.

The changes are evident even before you enter the property. Parking at the end of Glendale Avenue, there is a patch of knotweed growing in the shade of young Norway maples. Two enormous cottonwoods nearby mark the boundary of

the conservation area, and the sign for the conservation area is just a few feet further. On the slope to the left are more Norway maple and Japanese knotweed, on the right is a grove of black locust above a carpet of pachysandra and wintercreeper.

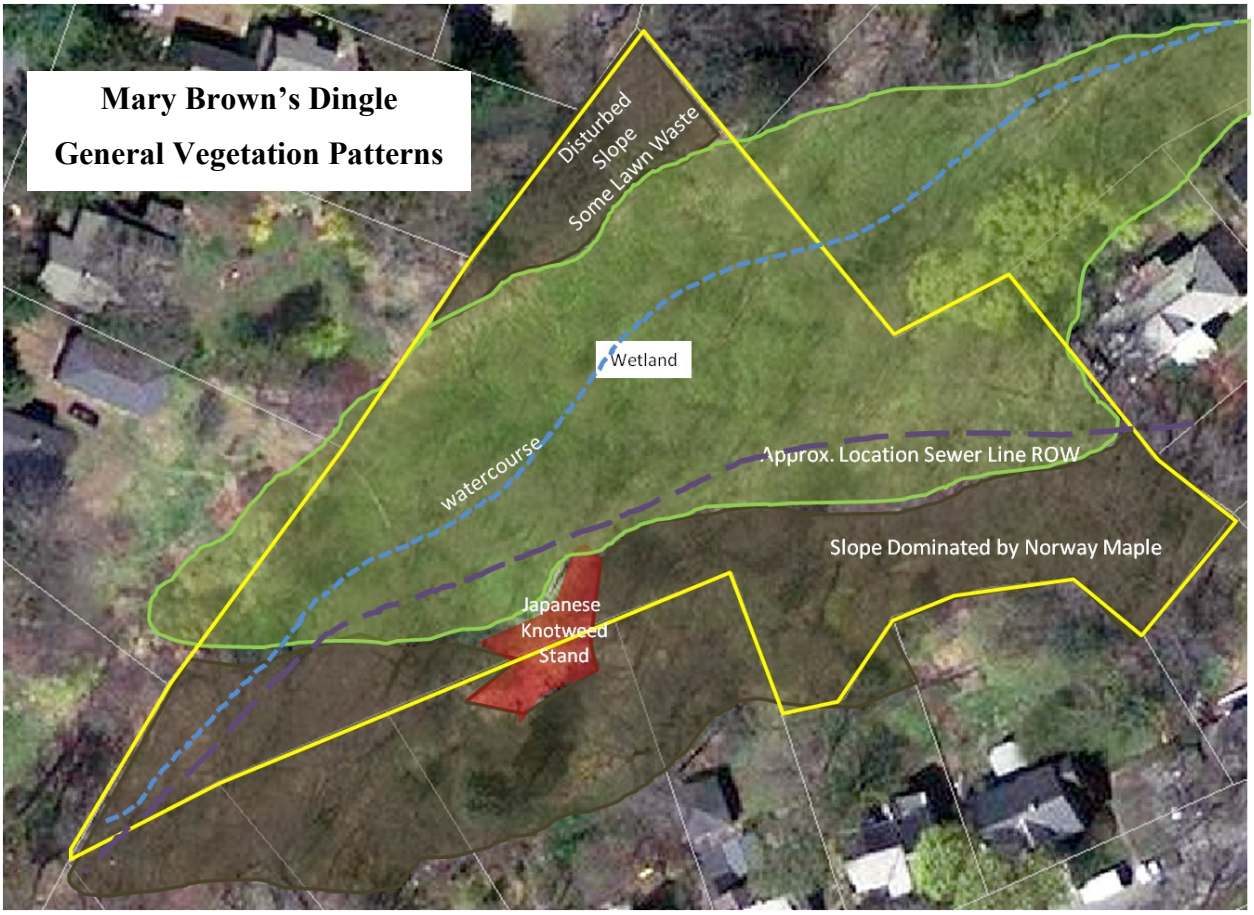
Walking up through the conservation area, the dingle's eastern slope (behind Crescent Street and mostly private land) is dominated by a canopy of Norway maple, with scattered catalpa, elm, and red maple. Below is a tangled mess of non-natives, including wintercreeper, Japanese knotweed, garlic mustard, and celandine. In fact, nowadays, native plants are few and far between.

Wintercreeper, a member of the same family as Asiatic bittersweet and a type of Euonymus, now covers the hillside . Insert is a close-up. This plant is being tracked in the state because of its invasive potential.

The vegetation isn't much different along the sewer line easement. In 1993 it was open, sunny and seepy, with a mix of boneset, goldenrod, touch-me-not, fringed loosestrife, rushes and sedges. Today, most of those species are gone, replaced by lesser celandine, garlic mustard, Japanese knotweed, multiflora rose, privet and Asiatic bittersweet. Elm, red maple and black locust grow along the west-

ern edge, which is now thicker and shadier than twenty years ago.

Just beyond is the wetland, which has actually fared a little better. It still includes many of the native plants that grew here twenty years ago, including a border of black willow, silver maple and red maple and a carpet of skunk cabbage in the spring. More speckled alder and elderberry have grown up in the shrub layer, but so have privet and multiflora rose, which are now the most common woody plants in the wetland. A large patch of Japanese knotweed now runs along the prop-



erty's western boundary, marking the edge of the backyards of the homes along Franklin Street.

Wildlife

As a green island surrounded by homes, the conservation area does provide a small but suitable habitat for a variety of animals that do well in suburbia. This list has changed during the last twenty years. Gray squirrels, raccoons, opossums, and skunks are still here, but now deer are regular visitors too. The bird life has changed as well. Carolina wrens and red-bellied woodpeckers, which were rare sightings in Northampton twenty years ago, are now year-round residents and part of the acoustic background that makes up Mary Brown's Dingle.

A Preliminary Checklist to the Vertebrate Animals at Mary Brown's Dingle	
Birds	**Reptile**
Mourning dove	Garter snake
Red-bellied woodpecker	
Eastern Phoebe	**Amphibians**
Black-capped chickadee	Spring peeper
Tufted titmouse	Red-backed salamander
Blue jay	Pickerel frog
Fish crow	
House wren	**Mammals**
Carolina wren	Raccoon
American robin	Skunk
Ruby-crowned kinglet	Opossum
European starling	White-tailed deer
Cardinal	
Common yellowthroat	
Eastern junco	
Cowbird	
American goldfinch	
White-throated sparrow	
English sparrow	
House Finch	

Recommendations

When the Conservation Commission first acquired this parcel, it was hardly pristine. Fill had been dumped around the edges, the sewerline had been routed through. But in those days, non-native plant species were still a non-issue. Owning the land meant protecting it, and management and stewardship were limited to cleaning up trash and putting up a sign. That's no longer the case.

If the conservation commission intends to maintain this area for "passive recreation and conservation purposes, and for the protection, preservation, promotion and development of the natural resources," several steps need to be taken. A first step would be increasing public awareness and introducing more people to this conservation area. A field walk could be organized to help introduce the conservation area to the neighborhood. Such an

outreach effort might also help to minimize yard waste dumping in the future and lead to efforts by the abutters and adjacent neighborhood to control some of the invasives and transform this place into a more usable, enjoyable place, reestablishing the trail and maybe even installing a small bench. The DPW should be brought into the planning phase to discuss periodic mowing and clearing of the sewerline.

As small as it is, Mary Brown's Dingle is the largest piece of wildness left on Round Hill and the last place on Round Hill where a spring is allowed to emerge naturally. Its wetlands also help to mitigate flooding and aid in groundwater recharge, the entire parcel provides some limited wildlife habitat, and for the immediate neighbors, it is a small green backdrop for their homes.

Realistically, this conservation area will never be more than a pocket preserve/park. That's not a bad thing, but by attending to some of the invasives and adding some other modifications, Mary Brown's Dingle could be a much more interesting natural area for everyone—wildlife included.

The non-native plant known as lesser celandine forms a carpet on the ground not far from the wetland; above, from the west end of the conservation area, looking east. The green is the skunk cabbage in the wetland in the early spring.

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