Brownfields
Success Story

250 Birge St.
Brattleboro, Vt.

Located along the Whetstone Brook, this 12-acre site formerly used as a sawmill and for storing lumber has been cleaned and redeveloped as a park and restored floodplain that will help protect downtown Brattleboro from future flooding and storms.

In the 1800s, Brattleboro was a regional center for trade due to accessibility to waterpower and major transportation. Watermills, sawmills, gristmills, and manufacturing shops became a central source of economic activity, earning the area the nickname of "Sawdust Alley." A woolen mill onsite was converted to a sawmill in the 1880s, with William H. Fletcher operating the site in the late 19th century. In 1904, the Holden & Martin Lumber Company purchased the Fletcher mill to expand their operations. In the early 1900s, Holden & Martin built over 100 affordable homes for Brattleboro's working families. Buyers purchased through modest down payments and rent-to-own plans. Lyman Holden proudly stated the company never foreclosed on any of these homes.

Priming the Property for Redevelopment

With the property's prolonged use as industrial storage for 120 years, the site was filled with gravel, elevating the land above the river until it no longer functioned as a floodplain. As a result, when Tropical Storm Irene swept through Brattleboro in 2011 destroying homes and businesses, the floodplain was unable to absorb the excess water.

After repetitive damage to downtown Brattleboro from Irene and other flooding events, the state and local entities determined that floodplain restoration projects were a priority. In 2015, the Town of Brattleboro received $400,000 in EPA Brownfields funding to assess environmental challenges throughout the town, develop cleanup plans, and get community input. The town invested $72,000 of this funding to evaluate possible contaminants at 250 Birge Street. Assessments in 2016 and 2017 found polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons in the soil and gravel fill.

Aerial image of the floodplain alongside the Whetstone Brook at 250 Birge Street (photo credit: Vermont River Conservancy and Town of Brattleboro)

EPA Grant Recipient:
Town of Brattleboro, Vermont River Conservancy

Grant Types:
Assessment, Cleanup

Current Use:
12-acre park and floodplain

Former Uses:
Industrial- lumber storage and uses

Tree plantings on the restored Whetstone Brook floodplain (photo credit: Vermont River Conservancy and Town of Brattleboro)

EPA
United States Environmental Protection Agency

Newly planted saplings and flowers on the restored Whetstone Brook floodplain (photo credit: Vermont River Conservancy and Town of Brattleboro)

Vermont River Conservancy purchased the site in 2017 and received $200,000 from EPA's Brownfields program in 2018 to clean the site. In August 2023, cleanup began with the excavation of about 10,000 cubic yards of contaminated soil. The contaminated soil was buried on site in an area that was uncontaminated. In addition, 55,000 cubic yards of gravel and a berm alongside the brook was removed. With the completion of cleanup and redevelopment of the natural floodplain, and a conservation easement in place, ownership of the site will be transferred to the Town of Brattleboro.

> **"In June 2024, after a decade-plus of multiple federal, state, and local partners working diligently to design, assess, engineer, communicate, construct, and fund brownfield cleanup and restoration of a former industrial lumber yard, our work is complete! The EPA Brownfields Grant Program was the first funding source that catalyzed this complex and challenging project and leveraged state and federal (FEMA) dollars for environmental assessments, archeological services, and ultimately site clean-up as well as floodplain restoration - removing 55,000 cubic yards of material, planting approximately 4,500 stems (beautiful river trees and edible shrubs), and creating a low-impact nature trail."**
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> Erin De Vries, Conservation Director of Vermont River Conservancy

Today

Reducing Brattleboro's vulnerability to flooding and extreme weather events was essential to the development of this park and restored floodplain as part of a larger effort by local and state entities to help protect homes and business from future floods. Environmentally-conscious strategies were at the forefront of site planning and cleanup. Project redevelopment included sustainable land management practices and the installation of green infrastructure. Additionally, invasive vegetation was removed, and native bushes and trees were planted to mitigate damage and catch flood debris from going downstream.

With the support of federal, state, and local partners, Vermont River Conservancy and the Town of Brattleboro worked together to enhance the town's flood resiliency. Vermont River Conservancy and the Town of Brattleboro received a total of $2 million from the EPA, FEMA, the Vermont Flood Resilient Communities Fund, Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, and the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation.

The restored floodplain now provides recreational activities as a public park with access to the Whetstone Brook. In addition, the park allows for new housing in the surrounding area. The successful redevelopment of this site revitalized downtown Brattleboro while reducing environmental and extreme weather impacts to the community.

For more information:

Visit the EPA Brownfields website at www.epa.gov/brownfields or contact Jess Dominguez at 617-918-1627 or Dominguez.Jessica@epa.gov.

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