A handcrafted, rough-hewn bench, featuring timber milled from a 134-year-old maple that had toppled in a windstorm on Mt. Tom, offers a contemplative retreat at a river access point along the Ottauquechee River Trail. Benches at 10 scenic river viewpoints along the ORT were built by staff from the Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Historic Site and members of the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps this past summer. Photo Provided

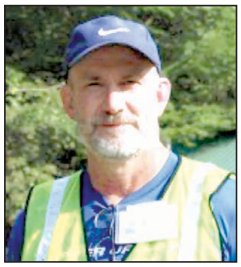
Ottauquechee River Trail marks active, successful first year

By Tom Ayres
Senior Staff Writer

The Ottauquechee River Trail (ORT), which meanders along an accessible, flat, family- and senior-friendly path beside the fields and riverside of east Woodstock for nearly three miles, recently marked its first year as a favored locale for hikers and casual walkers alike throughout the region.

After nearly 20 years as a concept first put forward by landscape architects consulting with the Two Rivers-Ottauquechee Regional Commission — and a year of planning and execution by a dedicated team of community volunteers that began in the summer of 2019 — the ORT opened to the public on Labor Day 2020. The easy trek through an engaging riparian ecosystem follows the Ottauquechee River's bank, allowing hikers to walk on a mowed path with ready access to several scenic river viewpoints, before returning through wooded areas and fields to the trailhead at East End Park — itself a new go-to site on Woodstock's recreational landscape that also opened on Labor Day 2020.

"We are a year old and people love it," said Tom Weschler, a lead volunteer with the ORT project who first helped convene community members interested in establishing, maintaining, and using the trail two years ago. "We have had mechanical trail counters there measuring for a couple of weeks at a time this past summer and we are averaging 500 users each week, which is awesome," Weschler added last week.



A self-described "trail geek," Development Director Randy Richardson with the Upper Valley Trails Alliance, has been a lead volunteer with the Ottauquechee River Trail and presently serves as the ORT trail manager. Courtesy of Upper Valley Trails Alliance

Ottauquechee River Trail volunteers Wendy Jackson, Fred Schlabach, and Jim Sadwith assemble a picnic table from a kit that Schlabach, an East Pomfret carpenter, designed after sourcing local wood. Picnic tables were installed this past summer at 10 river access points along the ORT. Photo Provided

One of those frequent users — and the volunteer trail manager for the ORT — is Randy Richardson, a longtime Woodstock resident who works as the development director for the Upper Valley Trails Alliance (UVTA), a Norwich-based organization that advocates for the use, maintenance, and development of trails throughout the region through education, outreach, and stewardship activities. The ORT is a member of the alliance. Richardson, a self-described "trail-obsessed geek," is passionate about his lifestyle and work life — and especially about the OTR now flourishing in his hometown of Woodstock, where he hikes and walks area trails virtually every day.

"I got involved with the ORT simply as a citizen interested in opening up different options in the area for people and not in my capacity as a staff member at UVTA," Richardson said Sunday. "I especially like that the ORT is such a different trail for this area because it is more accessible. Before my mom and dad both died, I was always looking for places for them to walk as they got older and struggled with their health. The ORT is the kind of trail I wished we'd had then, so we didn't have to do our walking together along roadways like Old River Road, especially at this time of year when there is so much traffic on the roads," Richardson continued.

Richardson's initial connection with Weschler and the other volunteers working on the ORT concept was fortuitous. It meant that the ORT organizers were able to tap into UVTA's expertise and support services early on, both Weschler and Richardson said.

"The UVTA is the group we went to for advice and support to do the original trail construction," Weschler offered. "They helped us with the overall trail layout and with building the bog bridges. The ORT continues to maintain a membership with UVTA, which gives us access to their tools inventory, too — saws, trail tools of various kinds. UVTA is a huge resource that is vital to us."

Richardson explained that ORT organizers and their UVTA allies opted to create "a relatively low-impact trail" along the Ottauquechee. "A lot of times when you are putting in a trail you are actually doing what we call laying tread — you're trying to scuff up the surface and trying to make it a dirt-hardened surface, which means taking off the top layer of soil and compacting the trail. The idea with the ORT was to simply make it a mowed trail — and because it is so flat for the most part, you don't have to worry about erosion on that kind of trail. We now have a contract with someone to maintain mowing on the trail, and we maintain some other portions of it, such as some of the river viewpoints and the somewhat steeper section at the trailhead, where we've installed a ramp and steps, with UVTA staff and volunteer assistance."

The logo for the Ottauquechee River Trail was designed by Woodstock Union High School senior Tom Bissaillon last spring as part of a graphic design class led by WUHS art teacher Susannah Gravel. Bissaillon, who graduated from WUHS in June, was one of many area youths who participated in a wealth of volunteer activities on behalf of the ORT in its first year of operations. Photo Provided

Richardson also cited UVTA's role in mapping the ORT course and in negotiating with landowners along the trail for access and permission to cross privately owned lands, including those held by Sunset Farm, the Woodstock Resort Corporation, the Town of Woodstock wastewater facility, and the former Jaynes, Berge & Wright partnership, which sold its property near East End Park to East End Partners earlier this year. East End Park itself, which is stewarded by the Woodstock Community Trust, is also a collaborating property owner, Weschler pointed out.

Area youths have played vital roles in the construction, upgrading, and maintenance of the ORT over the past 16 months, both Richardson and Weschler noted. "We have the High School Trail Corps at UVTA," Richardson said, speaking of a series of one-week, intensive summer camps where high school students from throughout the Upper Valley learn trail building skills and teamwork while connecting with each other and the natural world. UVTA did a combination of leading volunteers of all ages on trail work on the weekends and had our professional staff and Trail Corps during the week building the steps and ramp at the beginning of the trail and the construction of the bog bridges along the way," Richardson said. "The

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Trail Corps crews work really hard. On the ORT, it was 85-90 degrees some days and raining the next, and they were out there moving heavy boards, digging at the side of hillsides, and lugging heavy stone — all of it managed with COVID protocols that summer of 2020."

On the ORT front, organizers collaborated with sixth-grade teachers and students from Woodstock Elementary School to bring youths to the trail site for conservation education sessions last school year. And students from a graphic design class led by art teacher Susannah Gravel at Woodstock Union High School also worked on potential logo designs for the newly created ORT. WUHS senior Tom Bissaillon, who graduated in June 2021, created the final logo.

The collaboration between the ORT organizers and the UVTA exemplified the multisector cooperation that it took to bring the ORT to fruition and to keep it running successfully through its first year and well into the future. The ORT team's work with Marsh Billings Rockefeller (MBR) National Historical Park staff and the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps (VYCC) summer program are a case in point. Working together this past summer, the two ORT community collaborators moved a towering, fallen Norway spruce that had been toppled in a 2019 windstorm from its longtime location near the summit of Mt. Tom to a nearby pasture and milled it in early July. At 33 inches in diameter, the 134-year-old tree was then fashioned into spacious, rough-hewn benches that now adorn contemplative river viewpoints at several locations along the ORT. "The VYCC crew cut more than 40 bench-feet from 10-inch spruce beams in the rain and constructed the benches on site," MBR Integrated Resources Program Lead Steve Mortillo said in an email.

A picnic table, built from a kit designed by carpenter Fred Schlabach of East Pomfret, adorns a river viewpoint along the Ottauquechee River Trail in East Woodstock. Photo Provided

Working independently from the MBR/VYCC collaborators, other ORT volunteers also busied themselves over the summer milling and building picnic tables that now also enhance the river access spots along the trail. "Fred Schlabach of East Pomfret designed the tables, sourced the wood, and prepared picnic table kits," Tom Weschler stated. "We then organized a volunteer day to have community members assemble the tables and then place them along the trail. With both the benches and the picnic tables, ORT asked Woodstock residents to sponsor a bench or table as a fundraiser," Weschler continued. "And with that effort, we raised enough money to fund what we believe will be our annual trail maintenance costs for the next one to two years."

Richardson concluded his conversation about the inaugural year of the ORT on a particularly thankful note.

"The biggest thing for me is that it has just been great to see people out there and active on the trail," the UVTA staff member and ORT trail manager offered. "The whole accessibility thing, seeing so many families with young kids, even some with all-terrain strollers, and the older people who may be a little unstable on their feet who use the trail because of the way it is set up and its safety — it's all been so gratifying. There just aren't very many of these kinds of trails around. It's a great benefit for the community."

To learn more about the Ottauquechee River Trail, contact Trail Manager Randy Richardson at 603-229-2210 or via email at randy.richardson@uvtrails.org.