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Neponset River/Ashmont Hill

A quiet river leads through a widening estuary to Boston Harbor, past riverfront communities and a public beach. This river—the Neponset—is a little-known sister of the larger Charles River. The two rivers could not be more different. Where the Charles is the focus of downtown and the universities, the Neponset flows past old chocolate mills and historic residential areas through one of the last remaining salt marshes and wildlife sanctuaries at the edge of Boston Harbor. Located along the boundary between Boston, Milton and Quincy, the river is being renewed with spanking-new parks and walkways. At the heart of this walk is the Neponset River Greenway (NRG), part of a long-range Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) plan for walkways connecting the Harbor to the Blue Hills, near Route 128. New access to the Greenway was provided with the inauguration of the Lower Neponset River Trail a 2¹/₂-mile pathway that follows the route of the former Dorchester and Milton Branch Railroad.

The Lower Neponset River Trail can be reached by quaint 1950^s-era orange and green trolleys that take passengers from the Ashmont Red Line MBTA Station to the beginning of the path at Central Avenue in Milton. From this starting point, a paved path follows the river past warehouses and the mill falls and reaches a gradually expanding tidal estuary with tall saltwater-washed grasses. The estuary was once a ship-building center, and also provided a pier for the nation's first commercial railroad, set up to deliver granite from Quincy by rail to construction sites like Bunker Hill and Fort Warren on Georges Island by boat. The estuary is being revived; for example, in a 65-acre new park on the site of a former drive-in theater and city dump, there is a restored salt marsh among the environmental damages it remedies.

Beyond the riverside path, the walk leads into the quirky residential enclave of Port Norfolk, and then, as an option for extending the walk, along Tenean Beach at Boston Harbor and through the historic Ashmont Hill neighborhood.

The walk

The walk begins at the Central Avenue Trolley Station on the Mattapan Trolley Line.

❶ **The geological setting** – A large outcropping of Cambridge slate hides picturesque old mill buildings and a tall chimney near the MBTA Milton Trolley Station. The sounds of falling water can be heard through shrubs and trees. Near a remodeled railroad bridge on the opposite bank of the river are outcrops of Roxbury conglomerate bedrock.

❷ **The old Baker's Chocolate Mills** – Near the MBTA Milton Trolley Station on Adams Street, chocolate production required seven mills on 14 acres. The mill complex, now converted to residential purposes, dominates the area around the trolley station. Here the river was dammed as early as 1635, when Israel Stoughton built a water-powered mill at a fordable riverside location. Early in colonial history it became the place where the old coast road to Milton and Plymouth crossed the river. The old chocolate mills focus on Pierce Square, a lively commercial area with restaurants and other retail outlets.

❸ **Cedar Grove Cemetery** – In 1868, the area was named for the clumps of cedar trees that thrived in the fields along the river. The cemetery abuts both the path and the MBTA line, which curves away through it. At the MBTA Butler Avenue Trolley Station is an information kiosk that gives an overview of the entire Lower Mills district.

❹ **The Neponset River Salt Marsh** – A beautiful wetland surrounds the Neponset River Estuary. Through an underpass just beyond the Butler Avenue trolley stop where the MBTA trolley curves away, the vista opens to spectacular wetlands, said to be the largest intact salt marsh within Boston proper. The vast salt marsh is part of the Neponset River Reservation, an integral element of the MDC regional park system.

❺ **The Granite Railroad** – The country's first commercial railroad traveled from Quincy's hills to riverbank piers on the opposite side of the Neponset. Enormous and heavy granite blocks could be transported by rail and then by water to construction sites like Bunker Hill and Fort Warren on Georges Island. The railroad was

constructed in 1826 as a safe and cost-effective experiment in moving the granite to market. Rails on supporting "sleepers," also of granite, provided an efficient way of moving stones. At first the carts laden with stone were pulled by teams of horses, and later by steam locomotives when it became a branch of the Old Colony Railroad. The right-of-way is now mostly covered by the Southeast Expressway (I-93), except at the river's edge.

❻ **The Granite Avenue Drawbridge** – First built in 1837, the bridge is a familiar landmark. If you are lucky, the drawbridge may go up while you are nearby. There is an informational kiosk here, as well as benches and a small public parking area. Take care in crossing Granite Avenue as there is no signal to help you cross. For safety in crossing, you might want to divert from the path and go left for one block to the signalized crossing at Hilltop Street.

❼ **The Keystone Building** – A former factory used by the Keystone Camera Company and a piano manufacturing company has been transformed into condominiums.

❽ **Pope John Paul II Park** – Captivating views dominate as the river widens dramatically and joins the harbor. At this new \$10 million, 65-acre park, paths branch off from the main trail and loop close to the riverbank and newly recreated salt marshes that replace some that had been filled in. The park, once the site of a drive-in theater and a City of Boston landfill, has become a popular recreation site containing ball fields, benches that welcome walkers, and pagoda-like sheds for picnics.

❾ **The Port Norfolk neighborhood** – Once mostly tidal flats, the area was gradually filled and joined to the mainland. Today Port Norfolk is surrounded by water on three sides, where the Neponset River Estuary meets Boston Harbor.

The Neponset River portion of the walk ends here. You can take a bus from Neponset Circle, or retrace the Trail back to a trolley station. Bus service from Neponset Circle to Fields' Corner Station is irregular on weekends, changing both its route and schedule.

For the Ashmont Hill part of the walk, turn right and follow Taylor Street, make a left onto Water Street. After about two blocks, a street continuation turns slightly right and becomes Conley Road.

❿ **Tenean Beach** – Bordering a thin linear cove of the harbor, this sandy beach was recently enlarged with 4,400 tons of sand. Further along the beach are outstanding views of downtown Boston and the harbor.

⓫ **Morrissey Boulevard** – A 1930^s version of an expressway built to funnel traffic between Boston and the South Shore, Morrissey Boulevard may be crossed at Freeport Street signals or by the pedestrian overpass near Stop & Shop on the right.

⓬ **St. Ann's Catholic Church and School** – From this 1889 institution, Ashmont Street, the continuation of Freeport Street, climbs the gentle slope of Ashmont Hill, with its variety of homes, churches and architectural styles of the 19th and 20th centuries. Three-deckers predominate on the ascent. At the intersection of Adams Street is the modified Tudor First Baptist Church with prominent stained glass windows.

⓭ **Ashmont Hill** – Farmland until the mid-1800^s, the area now includes 40 acres of late 19th century homes. After annexation of the area by Boston, the first large subdivision, Welles Hill, was laid out in 1872. Growth was sparked by streetcar lines. On the right at Louis Terrace is a striking modified Greek Revival home with double chimneys. As you near the top of the hill, you will see more Greek Revival and Victorian homes scattered along Ashmont Street.

⓮ **All Saints Church** – This building, at 209 Ashmont Street, is of considerable importance in American architecture as it is the first church designed by Boston architect Ralph Adams Cram (1892). All Saints is also valued for its extensive collection of ecclesiastical art within its unique carved oak and stone interior.

Continue a short distance down Ashmont Street to the traffic light at Dorchester Avenue. This intersection is called Peabody Square. Turn left, and the Ashmont MBTA Station will be straight ahead.