



Eastern Amberwing

MILLERS RIVER BLUE TRAIL GUIDE

ATHOL & ORANGE SEGMENT

1 Cass Meadow. Looking much like it did in Indian times, the large open field is one of several along the river that was used by the Pequoig tribe for growing corn. It is also home to threatened wood turtles. With such habitat increasingly rare in Massachusetts, Cass Meadow is now protected and managed on both sides of the river by the state and town.

2 Alan E. Rich Environmental Park. Alan E. Rich Park, adjacent to Cass Meadow, is a launch point on the Blue Trail. The Park contains native plants and was built with pervious pavement and other Low Impact Development “LID” features that manage stormwater and restore groundwater recharge. The park and meadow are one of Massachusetts’ 1000 “must see” places!

3 Baptism Cove. Between 1875 and 1882, local Baptist ministers baptized church initiates in the river here, using either side just upstream of the South Main Street bridge.

4 Athol South Main Street Bridge. In Indian and pioneer times, travelers crossed the river near this point, first by ferry, then by Young’s bridge, which was built around 1815 of stones and logs. In 1839 a covered bridge took its place, followed by the so-called Iron Bridge in 1883, a stone and cement bridge in 1923, and the present structure in 2010.

5 Indian Village, 1600s–Early 1700s. In this meadow off South Main Street, and across the river from the Waste Water Treatment Plant, the Pequoig Indians built their wigwams, raised their families, worshipped, planted corn and fished the plentiful river, which they called Baquag. This was their main encampment site.

6 Athol Waste Water Treatment Plant/Chief Pequoig Island. The sewage treatment plant on the south bank was constructed in 1970 to remove pollutants from the town’s wastewater before it enters the river. In this area there was once a “Great Island” thought to be the home of Chief Pequoig, which was removed in 1941 as a flood control measure.

7 Rowlandson Rock. Downstream of the railroad trestle, a large rock rising above the water off South Athol Road designates where 2,000 fleeing Indians crossed the river with their captives, including Mary Rowlandson of Lancaster, after their bloody attack on her town on March 3, 1676. Frontier soldiers numbering 400 pursued them for 45 miles but gave up their chase at the river’s edge.

8 River Terraces. Visible along the north bank, downstream of the railroad trestle and behind the cemetery, are several step-like river terraces. These illustrate past river banks and old river levels—perhaps centuries old.

9 Covered Bridge, 1874–1938. The rustic 100-foot bridge that spanned the river on Gage Road was built in 1874 at the suggestion of Edmund Gage, who was looking for a tranquil shortcut to town that would avoid travel near the railroad tracks along South Athol Road. This “Partridgeville Bridge” did good service until the giant flood of September 21, 1938 swept it off its foundation. Its old stone abutments remain visible.

10 Ancient Lake Shore. The river area lying between Daniel Shays Highway on the east and Orange Center on the west formed the north shore of Glacial Lake Orange at the end of the Ice Age. Extending 15 miles south, the lake was created when a massive ice field clogged the river at Wendell Depot, and lasted for hundreds or thousands of years.



South Main Street Bridge, Athol, c.1910

11 Brookside Park, 1899–1938. Downstream of the Daniel Shays Highway, a number of recreational resorts and amusement parks were located along the river, with Brookside Park being the biggest and the best. The many attractions at this 16-acre park near the town line (see marker along north bank) included a dance hall, ball field with grandstand, cinder track for bicycle and foot races, merry-go-round, boxing and wrestling bouts, deer park, roller skating, cafe, trolley station—and of course, boating on the river. The park was destroyed by the high winds and waters of the 1938 hurricane.

12 River Rat Race. A major annual river event in the region is the spring River Rat Spectacular, nearly 6 miles of smooth water from downtown Athol (map point #1) to Orange (map point #22) that is run for cash, glory and just plain fun. Begun in 1964 with 12 two-person canoes, the pack now averages almost 300 canoes—including many paddlers who travel from afar to compete—and the event typically draws 8,000 to 10,000 spectators.

13 Oxbow Area. When a river reaches a low-lying plain, like the one in Orange, it can meander widely. Over time, an oxbow forms as the river current erodes the banks of the meander. Eventually, the meander becomes very curved like the “oxbow” used by oxen.

14 Cooks Cove. This is a good spot, though shallow, to look for wildlife. (See “Look For” box on reverse side.)

15 “The Point” and “Swinging Footbridge.” In 1911 the Orange Boat Club erected a large clubhouse where the river is fed by the brook from Lake Rohunta (the “Branch”) at the Athol-Orange boundary. With its wide veranda facing the river, the clubhouse was a fashionable rendezvous for boating enthusiasts. In 1913 the Club built a narrow suspension bridge, nicknamed “The Swinging Bridge,” high above the river to give its members more direct access from the trolley line on Brookside Road to its clubhouse. Activities at the boat club flourished until the early 1930s.

16 “The Ranch,” 1923–1963. The Minute Tapioca Company bought 86 acres on the river in 1923 to provide recreation land for its employees and guests. Employees enjoyed the pool and bathhouses, water carnivals, summer theater, boating, horseback riding, croquet, shuffleboard, tennis, a children’s playground, concession store and more. The Ranch was sold in 1963, and is now a 155-unit mobile home park named Leisure Woods.

17 “The Straights.” In mid-winters between 1888 and 1912 when the river froze thick and smooth, horse trotters of Athol and Orange raced their sleighs in organized competition along this mile-long straightaway, which they called the Millers River Speedway. Ice skating was also popular, and at rare times it was possible to skate the full distance between the midtowns of Athol and Orange.

18 Cove. A culvert under the railroad track leads to another of the river’s coves—another opportunity for observing birds and other wildlife, and a chance to find an ice cream cone nearby on East Main Street.

19 Rodney Hunt Machine Company. On the north side of the river approaching the town of Orange is the site of the Rodney Hunt Machine Company, which has been a significant force in the community since the middle of the 19th century when it was founded. Today it is a major manufacturer of water control sluice gates and valves as well as other products.

20 Fisher Hill Indian Encampment. Rising above the Rodney Hunt Co. and sloping gently down to the north side of the river, this hill overlooking Orange Center was



Looking up the Millers from Orange, 1910

a camping place for a small tribe of Native Americans. According to legend, they were ruled by an aged white woman (squaw) who had been captured while a young girl, raised by the tribe and married its chief. The tribe continued its annual encampments as late as the 1830s.

21 Steamboats on the Millers, 1882–1920s. “Whoever thought of steamboats plying between Athol and Orange!” a writer marveled in August 1882, when the “Nellie S.,” a 20-passenger baby steamboat began transporting passengers from a wharf near the present Orange fire station to points several miles upstream. For 10 cents, pleasure riders enjoyed trips to Brookside Park and the covered bridge on Gage Road in Athol—or, on rare occasions when river conditions allowed, all the way to the South Main Street Bridge in downtown Athol.

22 Riverfront Park/O’Connell’s Wharf, 1907–1952. The wharf was named for “Admiral” John O’Connell, an early promoter of recreational boating on the river, who in May 1907 built a 26 x 14 foot boathouse on the south shore (East River Street in Orange) and rented canoes for use on the river. He also gave paying passengers rides in his launch upstream for four and a quarter miles. Today there is a new boathouse and launch point at this location, called Riverside Park, which is also the finish line for the annual River Rat Race Spectacular.

23 Water Carnivals, 1872–1932. This broad expanse above the dam in Orange was ideal for the July regattas that featured parades of decorated boats, boat races, water battles, tugs-o-war and swimming contests. The scene was lighted after dark by on-board torchlights, shore bonfires and Japanese lanterns. Entries included rowboats, canoes, sculls, skiffs, dories, scows and power boats.

24 Memorial Park & Peace Statue. Sculpted by Joseph Pollia and dedicated in Memorial Park in Orange on May 30, 1934, this statue is unique and famous as a war memorial that appeals for peace. A battle-worn soldier back from World War I counsels a young boy “It Shall Not Be Again.”

25 Orange South Main Street Bridge, 1802–03. The main crossing of the Millers River in Orange was a wooden bridge erected in 1802–03, and replaced in 1879 by the so-called “Stone Bridge” or “New Home Bridge,” named for the New Home Sewing Machine Company that operated on both sides of the river. That picturesque four-arch stone bridge was succeeded in turn by a steel bridge in 1937-38, which was rebuilt in 2005.

26 “New Home Dam”& Eel Pass. There has been a major dam at this site, just west of the street bridge, since 1790 when James Holmes built one of logs to provide water power for his grist and saw mills. The structure was re-built in 1877 and lasted until 1891, when the New Home Sewing Machine Company erected a new one. Following the floods of 1936 and 1938, the state built the current dam in 1939, lowering its height by four feet, and turned over control to the town in 1941. An eel pass was installed by the Athol Bird and Nature Club and MRWC just downstream of the dam in 2009 on the south bank, to help restore upstream passage of this native aquatic species to its historical range.

The Millers River Blue Trail and this Map Guide are projects of the Millers River Watershed Council, in collaboration with numerous organizations and individuals. MRWC wishes to especially thank the following for their support: Athol Bird and Nature Club, Americorps/MassLIFT, North Quabbin Woods, New England Grassroots Environmental Fund, Community Foundation of North-Central Massachusetts, Diane Nassif, Janice Lanou, Kirby Lecy and Keith Davies. A very extra special thanks to Richard Chaisson, whose historical research provided the basis for this Map Guide.

Photo credits: Cover photograph—John Burk • Eastern Amberwing and American Rubyspot—David Small • Casual Paddling and River Rat Race—Ivan Ussach • The Millers in Orange—Shannon Legare • Blue Heron—Joe Superchi

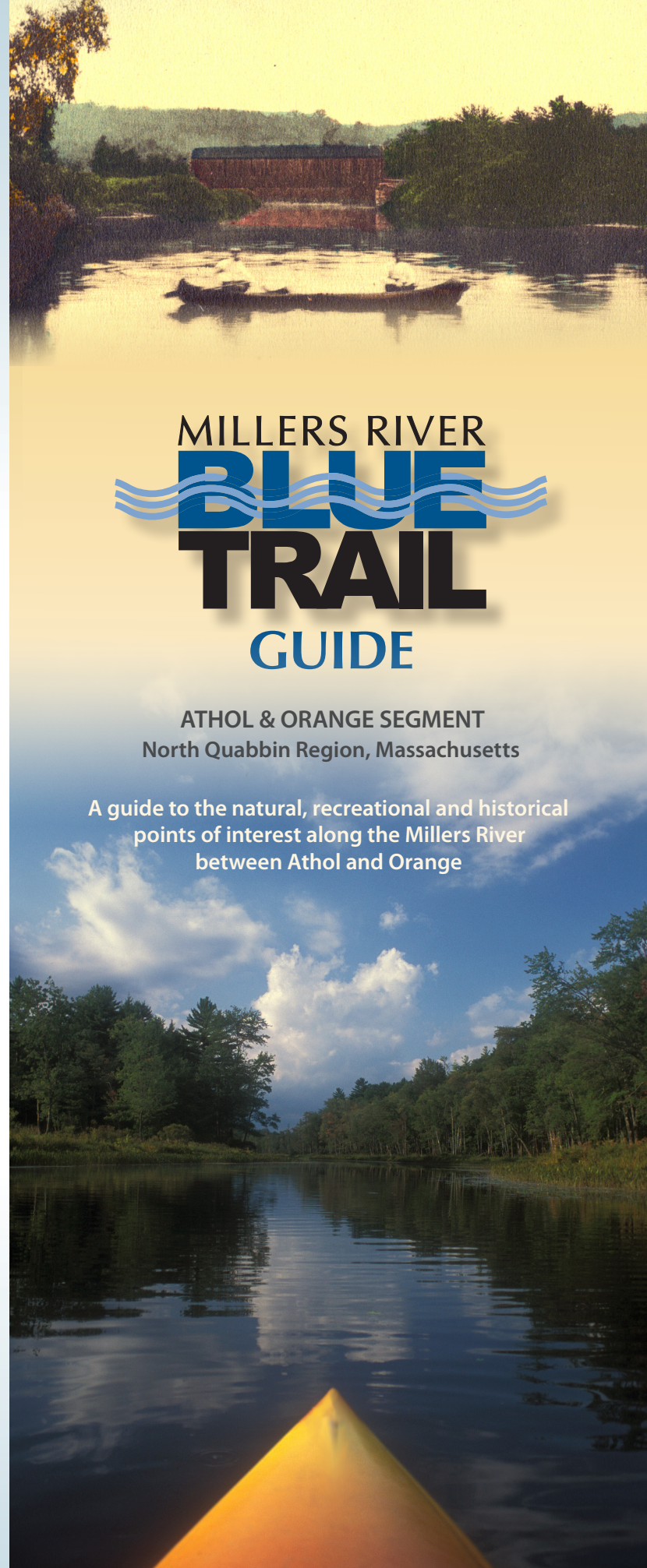
Postcard sources: J.R. Greene and Janice Lanou. Cover postcard caption reads “Canoeing on the Miller’s River Brookside Park between Orange and Athol, Mass.” (c.1910)

Logo design: Pat Spaulding

Printed by: The Highland Press, Athol, MA

Graphic design: Barbara A. Stowell • www.grayrockgraphics.com

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