

# A History of RiverLink

## A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

*Karen Cragolin, RiverLink's founder and executive director for 30 years, wrote this in 1995. The following article was written for and appeared in the NC American Planning Association magazine after the Cotton Mill and Richmond Hill fires in 1995.*

The Asheville riverfront is where all the issues start to come together. The river is where economic development, land use planning and environmental concerns meet and marry. The tragic arson inspired fires which swept through the riverfront in April of 1995 has heightened awareness of what was lost as well as what is possible for the future.

When it comes to real estate only three things matter —

location, location, location. The urban riverfront now has several prime level acres of developable real estate where the historic Cotton and Chesterfield Mills once stood. Developing these properties in a flood-prone area is not only possible it is very desirable with careful planning. Think of all the cities you have visited that are lucky enough to have a river. There's a special affinity that people have towards water. They like to walk, eat and shop near it. It's a natural attraction.



In the aftermath of the fire, all of us who have been involved have come to have an appreciation of the whole process of disposal of the buildings materials resulting from demolition. In the case of the Cotton Mill, there is a lot of brick to be dealt with. The Cotton Mill was 122,000 square feet encompassing three and one half acres. Some of the brick can and must be reused, perhaps as part of the facade for whatever new construction occurs on the site. Some of the brick is covered in lead paint which is considered hazardous waste. The lead contaminated brick must be disposed of in the land fill where the impact if any of the contamination can be monitored.

Disposing of the contaminated brick will be a very expensive proposition at \$55 a ton, plus hauling fees. All sorts of creative solutions are being floated now regarding the contaminated brick. Could we use that brick to line a new section of the land fill? Could the site be used as a demonstration project to test a bacteria used by the army which eats lead paint? These and many more options are being asked and explored.

More questions than answers, yes. More energy, options and creativity now as a result of the fire? Yes. What is certain, beyond a doubt is that RiverLink and riverfront development enthusiasts are more determined than ever turn recent events into an opportunity.

## THE FRENCH BROAD RIVER DEFINES THE REGION

The Cherokee called the river “Long Man,” and its many tributaries the “Chattering Children.” “Tahkeyostee,” or “Where They Race,” was how the Native Americans described the French Broad’s fast moving rapids. The earliest settlers called it the French Broad because it was the broad river that flowed into the French territory. Today it is known simply as the French Broad River. The story of the French Broad River is the story of the American river in microcosm, full of paradise and paradox.



For the early travelers seeking to scale and settle the area the river’s low, flat lands provided the easiest access through the beautiful but steep Blue Ridge and Smoky Mountains. Settlers came seeking new lands and new opportunities in the beautiful wilderness now known as Western North Carolina. The mountains were majestic and the rivers were clean. Life for the first settlers was dangerous and difficult, but the beauty of the land and the river made them want to stay. Before long they were growing their crops, building their houses and starting their businesses along the banks of the French Broad. The French Broad River was the preferred transportation option for the turkey, hog and other herders from Kentucky and Tennessee seeking to sell or ship their goods to the lucrative ports in South Carolina. The Buncombe Turnpike along the French Broad provided the access to these markets that the herders needed. As a result of the heavy traffic a series

of Inns developed along the French Broad to house the traveling herdsman. It wasn’t long before farmers in the area started growing and selling crops to feed the hungry travelers and their livestock.

When the railroad arrived in Asheville in 1880 the small settlement quickly became a city. George Vanderbilt was one of many who visited Asheville and decided to stay. These “newcomers” indelibly changed the face and direction of the city. They brought new ideas and money. “Newcomers” continue to arrive in Asheville and their influence has been profound. A significant percentage of the local and regional economy today is based on the young, energetic retirees who have migrated to WNC.

In 1905, the Asheville Electric Company created a small diversion off of the French Broad, erected a carousel, a boathouse and an outdoor movie screen that could only be viewed from a boat in the river. Like most facilities at that time Riverside Park was segregated. But for the residents of Asheville’s historic Montford neighborhood and the merchants of downtown Asheville, there were trolley cars that carried families and lovers to the area’s premier recreation spot on the banks of the French Broad River — Riverside Park. Many of today’s visions of what the river should be are based on the memory of how integral to the life of the community the old Riverside Park was. A fire in 1915 destroyed much of it. The great flood of July 16, 1916 wiped out what remained of the park. Riverside Park was never rebuilt.



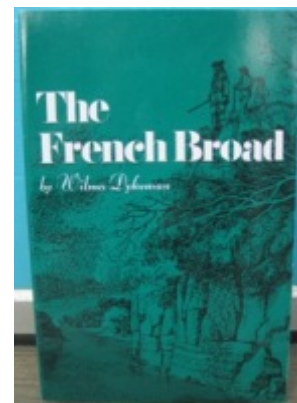
The Flood of 1916 had grave consequences for life in urban Asheville. Before the flood many people lived on or near the river, next to large cotton mills and tanneries. After the flood, the factories stayed but the residents moved. The 1920s and 1930s were the heyday for factories along the river providing much needed jobs for the people of the region. Ice houses, distilleries, coal and grain storage facilities complemented the thriving trade in cotton and hide tanning which flourished along the urban riverfront.

The railroad continued to play an important role in moving goods and people to and from Asheville and the region. Asheville had gained a national reputation as a health spa, particularly for patients seeking treatment for tuberculosis. Today the Asheville Chapter of the Railway Historic Society sponsors steam engine excursions twice a year along the French Broad River gorge. Through an agreement with the Norfolk Southern Railways the local chapter has brought home steam engine #722 as a permanent static display. It's been rescued. Steam engine #722 was Asheville's premier cargo engine from the 1920s through the late '40s. A feasibility study is currently being conducted to determine if AMTRAK service should be restored to Asheville.

Also during the 1920s Asheville witnessed a land boom. Properties were changing hands so often that the register of deeds moved his office outside, in front of the courthouse, to better record the land transactions. After the boom came the bust, followed by the Great Depression that swept across the United States. Many of Asheville's decisions today are based on the memory of the boom and bust that occurred in the late 1920s. Asheville proudly paid off all its indebtedness from the bankruptcy in the late 1970s, but the memory of the terrible depression still haunts and clouds policy decisions today.

During the Great Depression Asheville began a long-term policy of "deferred maintenance." Sewer and water lines, sidewalks and streets, the infrastructure of the city was ignored for over 50 years. Today's residents are paying the price of the "deferred maintenance" policies adopted in the 1920s and '30s. Sewer and water prices have increased dramatically and will continue to rise as the city begins to retrofit the system. The Swannanoa River Valley became so bad that the State of North Carolina intervened in the late 1980s and imposed a moratorium on any new construction.

In 1955 a young woman named Wilma Dykeman published a book entitled The French Broad. Today she regales audiences with tales of her difficulty getting the book published. Publishers looked at the title and assumed that a titillating tale awaited them regarding a foreign woman. Even more difficult were her efforts to include a chapter in the book about pollution. The river had endured decades of misuse with no state, local or federal regulations to protect it. To interest her publishers, and to provide a sense of anticipation, she entitled her chapter on pollution "Who Killed the French Broad." In spite of her publisher's reservations, she convinced them that pollution of the river was a story in need of telling. Once the book was published "Who Killed The French Broad" became the most talked about chapter, and attracted the most national media attention.



During the 1970s the federal government passed its first comprehensive legislation enacting standards to ensure clean water and clean air. Also during the 1970s the Tennessee Valley Authority looked at the French Broad and determined they could control flooding and create hydro-electric power if they dammed the river. Almost overnight a group of citizens banded

together from all across WNC. They called themselves the Upper French Broad River Defense League, and began a legal battle to keep the French Broad free flowing. They won. Today the French Broad is a free-flowing river without dams, subject to periodic flooding.

Having lost the battle to dam the French Broad, TVA hoped to redeem itself by appropriating funds through the local Council of Governments, Land of Sky Regional Council, to create a series of river access parks along the 117 miles of the French Broad River. Once the river access parks were established, Land of Sky wanted to keep local attention focused on the French Broad River. To accomplish this LOS helped create The French Broad River Foundation, (FBRF). The mission of the FBRF was to create more river access points for recreation while keeping the public thinking about clean water. The FBRF became a non-profit organization championing the French Broad throughout its 117 mile watershed. Jean Webb, an Asheville native and long time citizen activist, became the FBRF's first chairperson. She was a natural choice since she had been the central figure in Asheville's attempts to spruce-up the city for the bicentennial celebration. As the director of Quality Forward, which led the bicentennial effort, Jean understood the importance of clean streets, recycling, and clean water.

Citizen involvement with the river's water quality and debris intensified in the 1980's with the establishment of river clean-up efforts sponsored by Quality Forward, the FBRF and other citizen led groups. Years of neglect coupled with no long term planning had turned the banks of the French Broad River into auto graveyards and landfills. The views of the river from any of the many bridges passing over it were anything but attractive. Discarded tires, abandoned automobiles and bone distillation plants lined the banks of the urban riverfront. The thriving factories of the 1920s and '30s had closed, leaving large mostly abandoned industrial buildings all along Asheville's urban river corridor.



During the era of urban renewal, Asheville, like many cities, built public housing projects. Asheville's' public housing projects were placed out of sight and out of mind — along the French Broad River.

New roads were built between the river and the downtown, further isolating the river and making access nearly impossible. The French Broad River in Asheville became a no man's land dividing the city. West Asheville residents

considered themselves isolated. They were on the wrong side of the river, the working class side.

Simultaneous with these events, policymakers had determined that the only reliable source for drinking water was the French Broad River. The Land of Sky Regional Council and other government agencies aided by the TVA began a series of management studies and evaluations to tap the French Broad as the primary drinking water source for Buncombe County. If the region were to grow, it needed an abundant source of water, and the French Broad River was the only option. One local politician, having visited other cities, recognized the potential for developing the French Broad as a recreational and tourist destination and began talking about its development. Funds for studies were appropriated through LOS and TVA to begin to look at ways of developing the river. Nothing concrete happened, but the public dialogue about the river and its uses continued.

Finally, the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce hired a consultant to determine how to keep visitors in the area "one more day." Asheville's premier tourist destination, the Biltmore Estate, attracts 750,000 visitors a year, pumping millions of

dollars into the economy. It seemed logical that if another tourist destination spot were developed along the riverfront, which runs right through the city, the tourists would multiply and extend their visit. The consultants recommended that the French Broad be developed as the best way to keep the tourists “one more day.”

Also during the 1980s the City of Asheville began a long term public participation process called “Alternatives for Asheville.” During this process a number of public hearings, called “charettes,” were held all across the city in community centers and at city hall. The citizens were asked what they wanted their city to look like in the year 2010. Without exception every meeting resulted in citizen voices clamoring for the revitalization of the French Broad as a mixed-use area with greenways, walking and biking paths and a reduction in the amount of dirty polluting industries along the river’s edge.

The city adopted the “Alternatives for Asheville” recommendations and incorporated them into the award winning City of Asheville 2010 Plan.

In April 1989, RiverLink, then known as the French Broad Riverfront Planning Committee, a loosely knit unincorporated group of volunteers, came together under the auspices of the Asheville Chamber of Commerce and the FBRF to develop a plan for the Asheville Riverfront. The Chamber was primarily interested in the economic development opportunities that the river offered. The French Broad River Foundation’s primary concern was better river access and improved water quality. One thing was clear to both organizations — a marriage had to occur. Neither the environmental nor the economic development desires of either organization would come to fruition without the participation and input of both groups.



The Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation and a N.C. civil planning grant helped fund the Asheville Riverfront charette in April, 1989. Because Asheville’s riverfront presented many complex problems involving both the natural and the built environment, a joint AIA/ASLA charette team was formed. Prior to the actual charette numerous contests for Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts were sponsored in an effort to gain input into what the children wanted along the river. The kids responded in great numbers with posters and dioramas depicting a user friendly river peopled with bikers, runners, restaurants, and canoeists. A second contest focused on gaining input from the region’s burgeoning retirement community. The adults were concerned with good lighting, security, residential opportunities and stable asphalt surfaces that would allow them to walk leisurely along the river’s edge, to enjoy a meal or buy a specialty item at a riverfront boutique.

During this time Asheville’s downtown had been undergoing a tremendously successful revitalization effort. Initially downtown enthusiasts expressed concern that focusing on the riverfront would detract funds and attention from the downtown revitalization effort. That fear has been allayed. Asheville is emerging as the regional hub for WNC. The concept of “what is downtown,” has recently been expanded to include West Asheville, Biltmore Village, Montford and the French Broad River. Several of the river’s industrialists feared that a revitalized riverfront would put them out of business. Clearly Asheville’s riverfront charette had many obstacles to overcome.

RiverLink contracted with Peter Batchelor, Chairman of the NC AIA, Urban Design Assistant Team, to chair the joint AIA/ASLA charette. Peter had gained a national reputation as an urban designer and charette team leader. Peter divided the

charette teams into three groups. One team would focus on reestablishing the linkages between the downtown and the river. The second team would focus on the river within the city limits of Asheville. The third team would focus on the river as the region's most salient characteristic.

Since all of the charette team members were out-of-towners, each team member was assigned a local assistant from the same discipline. Consequently local architects were paired with visiting architects and local landscape architects paired with visiting landscape architects. There was also a healthy mix of sociologists, economists, and historians to augment the team's efforts.

Resource teams of experts were assembled from UNCA and Warren Wilson College. City and county employees were recruited along with representatives from state, local and federal regulatory agencies. Input into the charette would include experts ranging from the Army Corps of Engineers to zoologists. The resource team members agreed to be available 24 hours a day for the four-day charette. RiverLink didn't want anybody guessing what the correct answers might be to questions that might arise during the charette.

A valuable resource and planning tool for the charette was prepared by the Preservation Society of Asheville and Buncombe County in the form of an inventory of historically significant structures along the Asheville riverfront. The building inventory provided many insights into the number of historic buildings available for adaptive reuse and their surprisingly good condition. Many of Asheville's industrial buildings had ceased operation in the 1950s, but the sheer volume of industrial buildings and their size would present opportunities for future development and provide historic tax credits for their rehabilitation.



An Advisory Committee had been established comprised of the area's most influential agencies, corporations and leaders. If the French Broad River were to be revitalized, the cooperation and input of the entire community had to be incorporated into the final plan.

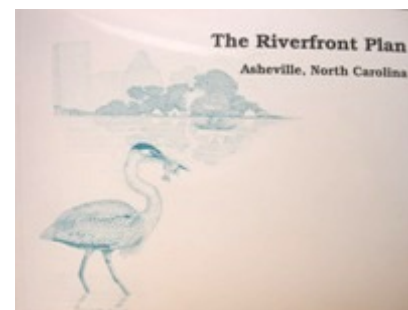
RiverLink sponsored a series of public input sessions during the charette, and the public response was overwhelming. All of the public hearings were aired live over the area's public radio station, WCQS. All day and all night citizens approached the microphones to express their ideas, their hopes and their fears. The real challenge lay ahead however: how to incorporate and balance the needs and desires of the entire community to revitalize the French Broad?

Typical of most charettes the heavy brainstorming occurred in the wee hours of the morning and more than one resource team member was called at 3 a.m. to discuss the issue at hand. The walls of the temporary headquarters for the charette team were covered with maps and diagrams. Reams of paper littered the floor and the coffee pot perked all night and all day keeping the charette team members alert. Local restaurants and garden clubs donated food and a constant stream of interested citizens participated in the on-going discussions.

On the morning of the fourth day a tired but exhilarated charette team emerged with a plan. As the TV cameras and radio microphones reported the results of the charette team's findings, a new era and image began to emerge for Asheville's ailing riverfront. [National Geographic](#) magazine had dispatched a photographer to cover the entire proceeding for inclusion in the June, 1990, issue on Greenways Across America. [The Asheville Riverfront Plan](#), complete with maps, diagrams and text, laid out a mixed use plan for the revitalization of the French Broad's urban corridor that satisfied the needs of the business, environmental and recreation community.

One month later, in May, 1989, a public referendum was held to provide the funds necessary to build a water treatment plant on the French Broad River. The referendum was soundly defeated. The citizens were not willing to drink the water of the French Broad. Nor did they believe it could be treated to provide a safe drinking water source. One thing was clear, despite the defeat of the bond referendum, the citizens viewed the river as a mixed-use opportunity and were willing to help restore it. But they did not want to drink it.

[The Riverfront Plan](#) was presented to elected officials in the city and the county. The plan was immediately accepted as the "official" vision for the rehabilitation of the French Broad River. The city adopted the plan as an addendum to its award winning 2010 long range comprehensive plan. [The Riverfront Plan](#) was awarded the North Carolina American Planning Association award for "Large Community Outstanding Planning" in 1990. It also was awarded the 1989 PICA Printers Award for the most beautifully designed soft-bound book.



It was now time for The French Broad Riverfront Planning Committee to incorporate in order to carry the plan forward. It was also time to develop a funding plan to underwrite the day to day operation of the organization. The French Broad Riverfront Planning Committee wasn't just planning anymore — it was doing. RiverLink would carry the plan forward and the name helped identify the mission – relinking the river back to the community.

RiverLink became a contract agency with both the city and the county. Every six months written reports were presented to local government officials detailing the riverfront revitalization effort.



In order to get people on the river, or rather to show them how to get to the river, RiverLink began leading monthly bus tours. At least once a month RiverLink lead a mixture of community leaders, elected officials, retirees, garden clubs and interested citizens boarded a bus in front of city hall and began the Asheville riverfront tour. Native and newcomer alike are treated to roads, neighborhoods and historical facts that had long been forgotten as they traveled the length of the French Broad and Swannanoa Rivers throughout the city limits of Asheville. The tours have been RiverLink's most successful marketing tool.

People knew that you could get to the river from the downtown. They just forgot how. RiverLink called this pivotal connection the Patton Avenue spine, a direct link from the downtown to the river tracing the old trolley car route that carried people to Riverside Park. During the two-hour bus ride, people ate their lunch and visited Asheville's oldest neighborhoods, the site of Asheville's first airport, the old Riverside Park location, dried up lake beds, Biltmore, The Richmond Hill Inn and began to envision linkages to the North Carolina Arboretum and the Blue Ridge Parkway Headquarters Building that is yet to be built.

When RiverLink presented [The Riverfront Plan](#) to the Asheville Tree & Greenway commission for approval, they were instructed to take the plan to the next level. In 1925, the city had hired Dr. John Nolan, an architect from Boston to design a city of the future. Dr. Nolan envisioned a series of greenspaces that would link the area's mountaintops and river valleys. The national economic depression precluded the possibility of the plan being enacted. But Nolan's concept will still sound. RiverLink and the Tree and Greenway Commission began to reinterpret the Nolan plan of the 1920s into a greenway master plan for the entire county. The same



opportunities didn't exist because of the intervening years of development and road construction — but the mountains and rivers were still there. Once the plan was conceptualized the Buncombe County planning staff computer mapped the greenway master plan. Public hearings on the plan have been held in every county community center. Mostly the crowds have been small but receptive. The idea of using the natural topography of the area as a greenway corridor, and tying into the Mountain to the Sea Trail that crisscrosses Buncombe County has mass appeal. Exactly how to do that is still an unanswered question. However, RiverLink will sponsor a National Greenway conference in September 1995. The conference theme is, "the economic development impacts of greenway development."

A giant breakthrough occurred in early 1991 when Carolina Power & Light Company agreed to donate to RiverLink a 1.9 mile section of riverfront property on the west bank of the river for use as the first link in the urban riverfront greenway. The property had been purchased by CP&L as a utility right of way. For years the property had been used as an "unofficial" landfill. Construction companies and concrete manufacturers had for generations emptied and cleaned their trucks along the banks of the French Broad River. Kudzu and poison ivy choked the trees and obliterated the view of the river.

RiverLink successfully petitioned the city to accept the donation of land from CP&L and entered into a public-private partnership to develop it. RiverLink also created the concept of "The Mayor's Greenway Award" to encourage citizens and corporations to donate land for public access along identified greenway routes. The first "Mayor's Greenway Award" was presented to CP&L during a ceremony at city hall with many handshakes and much goodwill.

Interest in the riverfront was growing. Many of the property owners along the river were anxious to participate in the revitalization effort. Several of the larger properties along the river had been in the same family hands for two or three generations. Thus their basis in the property was zero for tax purposes. This presented an interesting dilemma. If they sold the property they would cash out of the revitalization effort and pay most of the money to the Internal Revenue Service. Most have opted not to do that. A few property owners interpreted the renewed interest in the urban river corridor as a serious threat to their continued existence.

RiverLink was very interested in creating a design framework for the entire revitalization effort. A design blueprint was needed to move forward for both new construction and the anticipated adaptive reuse projects of the future. In September 1991, RiverLink sponsored its second charette to develop [The Asheville Riverfront Open Space Design Guidelines](#). This charette was funded through the NC Arts Council, under a grant provision of the National Endowment for the Arts Design Initiative Program. Once again a charette team of professionals was assembled. This time the team was comprised of architects, planners, landscape architects, sculptors, studio artists, printmakers, public art advocates and art educators. The charette chairman, Luther Smith, ASLA, APA, and RiverLink board member, divided the teams into three groups. Group one



focused on access and landscape issues. Group two focused on structures and facilities, while the third group focused on graphics.

The overwhelming message from the design charette was to keep the project focused on what is essentially Asheville. Indigenous materials, native plants, and historical context should be used as the guiding principles for developing Asheville's river corridor. It was clear that neither the public nor the professionals wanted a riverfront that looked or felt like Baltimore or Boston. The development of Asheville's riverfront should be a celebration of Asheville's history. Future development should reflect the best of the area's history in the context of modern needs. Architecturally structures should reflect the feeling of old Riverside Park, with steep roof lines and graceful details. Landscape materials should showcase the wondrous botanical diversity of Western North Carolina. Public art was discussed in detail. The charette team members agreed that Asheville's riverfront should be viewed as a canvas. Every item, no matter how mundane, whether a picnic table or trash receptacle, should be chosen to further the theme of celebrating Asheville.

## **REZONING THE RIVERFRONT & THE CITY**

During this same time period the city embarked on a public process to codify the 2010 Plan. Although the 2010 Plan had been adopted "in principle" by the city council it had never been translated into ordinances to carry forth the vision. City Council appointed six subcommittees focused on issues ranging from manufactured housing to riverfront revitalization. The six subcommittees were charged with making recommendations to be included in a proposed Unified Development Ordinance. The riverfront subcommittee was comprised of riverfront property owners, developers, real estate agents and the director of RiverLink. During three and four hour bi-weekly sessions the riverfront subcommittee of the UDO met over a two-year period to hammer out the details of how Asheville's riverfront could be transformed from a heavy industrial district into a mixed-use area that would allow for residential, commercial, industrial and recreational users to coexist side by side. [The Asheville Riverfront Open Space Design Guidelines](#) and [The Riverfront Plan](#) coupled with the Asheville 2010 Plan, provided powerful, thoughtful guidance for the committee to ponder. The committee undertook many field inspections and bus tours of the riverfront area which now had expanded to include one of the French Broad's main tributaries, the Swannanoa River.

When the Asheville City Council and Planning and Zoning Commission called the six sub-committees together to report their final recommendations to the public — only one committee had reached consensus — the riverfront district subcommittee. The committee had agreed that all river businesses should be grandfathered, but that no new junkyards should be allowed. It also recommended that speculative grading should be discontinued in the river district because of the fragile condition of the river and the need to protect the river as a sensitive and valuable resource. The UDO riverfront committee envisioned a river corridor with a greenway along the river for walkers and bikers dotted with new industries and residential opportunities. This vegetative corridor would also slow down run-off and filter pollutants rushing into the river.

Fifty-plus years of deferred maintenance had wreaked havoc on the city's infrastructure. For all practical purposes there wasn't a storm water runoff system. One way in which the conflicting demands of mixed-use development would be met was by requiring increased buffers and vegetative screening between incompatible uses. The committee also recommended that any industry damaging to the air or the water should be prohibited along Asheville's urban corridor.

The meeting to discuss the UDO subcommittee recommendations was punctuated with dissension regarding the recommendations of the other five subcommittees. The UDO process was stalled. Many thought that the fierce independence of the WNC mountain folks meant they wouldn't want any regulations related to or limiting land use. Several thought that the UDO subcommittee composition was not representative of the community at large. The environmentalists

claimed that too many developers had been included in the discussion. The developers claimed the environmentalists had dominated the process. A small but vocal group thought that any regulation relating to land use was unconstitutional.

It had been more than 14 years since Asheville's zoning code had been reviewed and many of the laws on the books were contradictory. Asheville's board of adjustment greets a steady flow of customers seeking variances from the laws on the books. Adding to the confusion and fuel to the fire is the ongoing debate regarding the amortization of outdoor signs and the ever present debate on "private property rights."

Following the public meeting to hear the six subcommittees' recommendations, city planning staff was directed to take the UDO recommendations and to begin to write an ordinance that would address all the needs of the community and the conflicting demands of its citizens. Today, the UDO is still in committee and remains a hotly debated local topic. Most recently the city hired its former interim city manager to review the entire UDO and make recommendations regarding its passage.

Despite the delay enacting the UDO, it is commonly agreed that mixed-use is the wave of the future for Asheville's French Broad River.



1992 was a pivotal year for RiverLink. RiverLink needed a home, a permanent base, on the French Broad River. The Janirve Foundation provided a grant for the down payment and RiverLink acquired The Warehouse Studios on October 1, 1992. Financing was provided by Public Interest Projects. The building was perfect. It provided office space, a large conference room and eight artist studios. The cash flow from the studio space covered the mortgage, taxes and utilities, allowing RiverLink to live on the river virtually rent free. A new industry was emerging along the riverfront to replace the cotton mills and tanneries that once provided jobs for

Asheville's workers. Crafters and artists wanted and needed large open spaces and inexpensive rents; the riverfront's industrial buildings provided the perfect combination. Today potters and glass blowers, sculptors, welders and iron workers, bookmakers, furniture makers, studio artists and graphic artists are all producing their crafts and creating their art along Asheville's riverfront corridors. Recycling operations are also flourishing. In November, 1994, RiverLink held a "scrap art" sale in cooperation with a former junkyard dealer. This was art that was guaranteed to rust! Paradise and paradox on the river.

During all this time the riverfront project continued to make progress. Where to start was the first question. Some thought that the east bank of the river, the area closest to the downtown, should be the starting point. However, everyone soon agreed that the first project, the demonstration project, should be on the west bank, at the confluence of the French Broad and Swannanoa Rivers. Ever present was the concept that the river had been perceived as the dividing line, east from west, "have" from "have not." Maybe the French Broad could help knit the community together. Maybe, just maybe, the river could become every man's land rather than no man's land.

RiverLink received a grant from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation to hire a landscape architect to develop a four-mile master plan for Asheville's urban river corridor. RiverLink proceeded to sell one-foot sections of greenway called "Deeds of

Support,” and sponsored a number of fundraising events to match the Reynolds Foundation grant. Finally a request for proposals was sent throughout the southeast region.

In keeping with the tradition of multi-disciplined teams to design the Asheville riverfront, RiverLink sought to hire not only landscape architects but architects and engineers to work together with the city’s very talented landscape architect, Al Kopf, and its Parks & Recreation Department. Asheville’s riverfront greenway had to be low maintenance, secure and filled with magic. The master plan had to exceed everyone’s expectations to be successful. One thing was sure: whatever was built had to withstand flooding. Flooding was never an “if,” it was only a question of “when.”

RiverLink contracted with the firms Edward D. Stone, Jr., ASLA, Mathews and Glazer Architects, and two local engineering firms to provide input into the structural and electrical mechanical needs and limitations of the riverfront greenway. The WNC Surveyor’s Association provided all the surveys for the planning and design process as an in-kind donation. The surveys confirmed a long-held suspicion — the French Broad had numerous wetland areas. The wetlands have become a distinctive design feature of the riverfront greenway. The entire design process was conducted under the guiding influence of [The Riverfront Open Space Design Guidelines](#).

Over the years the city had accumulated funds in its capital improvement project fund (CIP) for the riverfront effort. These funds were augmented by a Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund grant. RiverLink received “brick and mortar” grants from the Janirve Foundation, the Asheville Council of Garden Clubs, area Rotary Clubs, individual garden clubs, Robinson-Humphries, and numerous special fundraising events.



Finally on December 23, 1993, a contract was signed to begin construction on the first link of the riverfront greenway. Talk about paradise and paradox! Right next door to the construction site a giant auto graveyard still operates. The contrast is amazing. French Broad River Park was designed with the entire watershed in mind. It was conceived as the demonstration project, meant to set the standard and pace for all future river park development. French Broad River Park would have it all — 10 foot wide asphalt trails, the first restroom in the 117-mile river corridor, a picnic shelter reminiscent of old Riverside Park, an observation deck, a parking lot with lights, wildflower gardens, native plants, fishing areas and salt-treated wooden boardwalks over enhanced wetland areas. In keeping with ADA guidelines, the park was designed to be completely handicapped accessible. The multi-access trail is less than a mile long but has been used non-stop since the park was dedicated on September 25, 1994.

The winter, spring and summer of 1994 were the wettest in memory. French Broad River Park flooded twice during construction. It was completely inundated on August 17. Damage? None. In fact the rising flood waters left two inches of rich French Broad River silt which is nice green grass today.

In November of 1994 Asheville City Council responded to a long-time RiverLink request and directed planning staff to develop a neighborhood plan for Chicken Hill. Chicken Hill is the river’s oldest neighborhood and in serious decline. Petitions

to direct CBDG funds towards Chicken Hill had been denied for three consecutive years. Currently community input sessions are planned for February, 1995, and discussions are underway on how to attract CBDG, ARC and EDA funds. The scale model of Chicken Hill demonstrates the area's dramatic elevations, which could provide a dramatic entrance with sweeping mountain and river views and become the pivotal connection between the downtown and the river. Gentrification and displacement of the residents are issues RiverLink and the city will wrestle with as the neighborhood plan moves forward.



Two other events occurred in the evolution of the riverfront project in December 1993 with amazing consequences. The French Broad River Foundation decided to close its doors and turn over its geographic and program responsibilities to RiverLink. RiverLink became the non-profit spearheading the economic and environmental revitalization of the French Broad River, not just in Asheville, but throughout the French Broad River watershed. As a result RiverLink now sponsors the VWIN program. The Volunteer Water Information Network (VWIN) program has 70 monitoring sites along the French Broad River. The first Saturday of each month 70 volunteers dip their test kit beakers into the cool waters of the French Broad at precisely 12 o'clock. The samples are taken to a variety of refrigeration points ranging from pizza parlors to funeral parlors. The following Tuesday interns from UNCA gather the samples and bring them to the university lab for a series of tests. Every six months a report card is issued describing the condition of the French Broad.

Also in December, 1993, RiverLink formalized its ongoing partnership with the Preservation Society of Asheville and Buncombe County. Asheville's historic Cotton Mill was transferred to the Society by Clyde Savings Bank. The Mill, built in 1887, had been identified by RiverLink and the Preservation Society as the key historic property along the urban riverfront. A bankruptcy followed by a bank foreclosure threatened the Mills' existence. Today the Mill is "available for restoration" and is being marketed nationally. Despite its deteriorated condition the Cotton Mill is home to a glassblower, a craft cooperative and a construction company. It produces enough income each month to meet month to month expenses. The roof leaks and a demolition ball has wreaked havoc on one of the oldest sections, yet Asheville's historic Cotton Mill thumps with life and promise for the future.

There are many unanswered questions regarding the future of the French Broad. It is still zoned heavy industrial, precluding the possibility of residential uses. Yet illegal apartments quietly line the riverfront. The Watershed Protection Act is amended each year leaving planners and developers uncertain about its impact.

The signature for the Asheville riverfront project has always been the Cotton Mill's water tower. It's the riverfront trademark. It projects into the Asheville skyline and greets travelers crossing the river as an Asheville landmark. It's rusty and it's old. The water tower held the water to steam power the original Cotton Mill machinery. This spring, thanks to well known wildlife artist Sallie Middleton, the water tower will be stabilized and painted. Raffle tickets are being sold for a Middleton original framed painting. All of the proceeds from the raffle will be used to rehabilitate this distinctive riverfront landmark. Discussions are on-going if the riverfront mascot, the blue heron, should be painted as a symbol on the water tower. The herons have returned to the river since the water quality has improved. Last year the WNC Nature Center introduced river otter into the French Broad and Swannanoa Rivers. They are thriving. Last week we had a call from the oldest craft cooperative in WNC, "Do we have space for 17 professional artists in the 122,000 square feet at the Asheville Cotton Mill?" Hope springs eternal on Asheville's historic river — the French Broad.