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Bob Kerr

## There are lessons in, on and around the water

I've driven close to it, eaten lunch and had a cocktail a few yards away, but I had never actually seen Mashapaug Pond. It is one of those urban treasures easily missed because it is so unexpected among the streets and buildings and noise of the city.

Holly Ewald, an artist, and Phil Edmonds, a musician, writer and activist, kindly filled the gap in local geography for me. We drove behind the Job Lot strip mall on Reservoir Avenue and down a short dirt access road to the 77-acre Providence pond — peaceful and polluted.

The pollution, clearly visible in the foamy gunk splashing on the shore, is the bad news. The good news is that the pond remains a place to learn, a place to walk the shore and consider connections to very different times.

Mashapaug also remains the centerpiece of one of the wonderful, reassuring and sometimes zany rites of spring. That is, of course, the Urban Pond Procession, a moving celebration of the waters of Providence.

The procession comes none too soon in this year of hard news and grim forecasts. "I think it gives us all something concrete, fun and creative to rally around in a time and city in which things are pretty bleak," says Ewald, who started the procession four years ago. "Also, I think there are a growing number of artists who see and feel the ills of our society today and want to do something about them."

So there are artists in the procession and kids learning their environmental lessons and brass bands, large puppets and citizens who just want to see ponds reclaimed from too many years of neglect. It begins at Mashapaug and moves along a network of ponds to Roger Williams Park.

Mark the date: The fifth Urban Pond Procession is June 9. For details, go to [urbanpond-procession.org](http://urbanpond-procession.org). And while you're there, check out "An Indigenous View of Mashapaug Pond," a new book with a weighty title but one filled with a delightful mix of poetry and photography, art and history. It can be a guidebook to the pond, a way to better understand the place it once held in the Narragansett culture.

The pond procession has had a way of spilling all over the place. There are student workshops. There are inspired projects such as the floating sculpture designed by students at Sophia Academy and inspired by the designs of Gorham Silver Manufacturing Co.

Gorham is part of the story. Its 37-acre plant was built on the shore of Mashapaug in the late 1800s. It was a prominent name in the decorative arts for more than a half-century. And it was a prominent polluter with its silver, copper and bronze.

You can stand there, perhaps at the point where the water from Mashapaug drops below ground for its trip beneath Providence streets, and look across to the place where Gorham used to be. You can look back and beyond Gorham and consider the Indian culture that thrived on and around the pond before pollution.

And if you stay there more than, say, 15 minutes, you might start thinking how nice it would be if we could still jump in or throw a line in the water without concern for the consequences. It's best to hold that thought and take it to the Urban Pond Procession. You'll feel better for it.

[bkerr@providencejournal.com](mailto:bkerr@providencejournal.com)  
(401) 277-7252