

CELEBRATING TWENTY YEARS OF WATERSHED MOMENTS

1999-2006

Citizens Bringing Life to an Idea

In the mid- to late-90s, a group of citizens came together to address declines in the lake systems east of Columbia, and they formalized their association as a non-profit organization in 1999. The activities of this new Gills Creek Watershed Association continued at a relatively slow pace while the community discussed issues and sought means of building a functional organization.

With time and assistance from Richland County, the GCWA increased its focus and strengthened its commitment to comprehensive watershed management. Its goals were to create a strong and dedicated membership base, implement stream and lake restoration projects, and advocate for policy changes to improve water quality.

2007-2010

Organizational Growth and Mission Development Surge

The essential elements of a strong community-based organization were put into place. With help from Richland County and the River Network, the Strategic Plan was created and approved (**2007-2010**) and the Coordinator position was established (**2009**). With support from the City of Columbia, the first Gills Creek Watershed Management plan was created (**2009**). This comprehensive document identified five major watershed concerns – flooding, sedimentation, trash, water quality, wildlife habitat – as well as the best management strategies for each of 17 sub-watersheds. This provided a road map for future mission development and project planning. These multiple foundational elements fostered establishment of a Community Task Force and a community outreach activity program. The value and potential of the Watershed was increasingly appreciated through a membership drive, presentations and education events, stream clean-ups, and outreach through a monthly newsletter.

2011-2015

Restoration Projects Bring Results

An early target for restoration efforts was brought into focus by development of the Middle Watershed Master Plan **(2012)** for a central area of the larger watershed. This described a concept for a greenway and blueway, along with stream enhancement, extending from Kilbourne Road to the south at Shop Road. That plan created the vision and laid the groundwork for the current Crowson Road Restoration Project and potential Greenway development through the Richland County Penny Tax Program.

Another on-the-ground project was the Owens Field Park Best Management Practices and Education Project, done in coordination with Richland County and funding by a SC Department of Health and Environmental Control 319 grant **(2014)**. This work continued over three years and resulted in reduction of the degrading impacts of stormwater runoff in a highly used City of Columbia recreational park.

Opportunities also arose for a mitigation project, where necessary stream impairment was compensated for by a stream improvement elsewhere. In this case, involving Richland County Stormwater and the Airport Commission, a portion of Devil's Ditch at Hamilton-Owens Airport had to be buried in a culvert. This was offset by restoration of a site along Little Jackson Creek in the upper Watershed **(2014-2015)**.

Community Awareness and Engagement Bring Strength to Restoration Efforts

Continuing questions asked by the community are "what is a watershed?" and "why is it important?" To help with answers, the GCWA uses multiple approaches in addition to ongoing presentations, events, and media platforms. With funding from the Richland County Conservation Commission, Environmental Education Kiosks were established at sites in Sesquicentennial State Park and the Cross Hill Market in Columbia **(2014-2015)**. These help visitors learn about the past and continuing degradation of the Creek and how they can help. Another approach to raise community awareness was to encourage the reporting of potential water quality and stormwater concerns directly to appropriate officials. An early iPhone-based project **(2013)**, called iRanger Reporting Tool, was supported by the Richland County Conservation Commission. It gave alert citizens a way to send reports immediately, along with photos and geographic coordinates.

The Power of Water: the Extreme Flood Event 2015

The GCWA was vigilantly providing accurate information and working with other community flood responders during and after the dangerous and extensive flood of 2015. We were also participating in Richland County's Blue Ribbon Commission, which was tasked with identifying flood recovery projects. These ranged from floodplain buyouts to infrastructure improvements and stream restoration projects.

The historic event also called for our increased advocacy for strict enforcement of floodplain development ordinances, and wherever possible the preservation of floodplain and creek restoration. This major flood was extraordinarily important in helping the GCWA realize the extent of its mission and the seriousness of the work to be done.

The Pace Continues: Advancing Knowledge and Restoring the Watershed 2016-2018

For effective restoration, we need to know where impairments exist and how they can be addressed. To better understand the locations of significant pollution, GCWA began a volunteer-based water monitoring program, Adopt-A-Stream **(2016)**, so that a reliable, ongoing record of pollution-indicators could be established. That, in turn, provides information for identifying pollutant sources, so they can ultimately be dealt with. Another approach to studying pollution levels in the Creek was a study done in collaboration with the University of South Carolina at Aiken and funded by an EPA Environmental Justice grant **(2016)**. This work measured mercury levels in fish sampled from common fishing locations along the Creek, and results were shared with the public through outreach materials and public meetings.

Additional projects attack Creek degradation directly through modification of stream flow and/or preventing the introduction of pollutants and litter into the water. To those ends, the Owens Field Park Best Management Practices and Education Project was completed **(2013-2017)**. To the north, Palmetto Pride grants enabled the GCWA to install trash cans at litter hotspots to help reduce refuse entering Little Jackson Creek near Decker Boulevard, and the COMET is

managing their maintenance **(2017-2018)**. These specific projects were continuously supplemented through frequent, community-based litter and debris pick-ups.

The GCWA's largest project to date is the stream restoration project on Gills Creek at a 850-ft section along Crowson Road, made possible with major funding through a DHEC 319 grant **(2017)**. Project partners are the City of Columbia and the Richland County Conservation Commission. The project will re-contour and stabilize the stream banks, replant the banks with attractive, native vegetation, and improve water quality in the Creek. It will also beautify the Creek corridor in the Cross Hill area.

The Twentieth Year 2019

The design phase of the Stream Restoration Project at Crowson Road is completed, and construction is expected to be completed in 2020. The GCWA is also set to finalize an update to the original Watershed Management Plan – now ten years old. This revision, made possible with funding from Richland County Conservation Commission, will provide a critical basis for identifying future action priorities, as well as meet new DHEC requirements for project funding. In this 20th anniversary year, the GCWA is also making a big push to expand our stream monitoring program, Adopt-A-Stream, by increasing the volunteer and equipment base and adding strategic monitoring sites. With additional enhancements to our membership and education programs, we are energized and equipped to launch into another twenty years serving the GCWA mission.

READY FOR THE NEXT TWENTY YEARS

The GCWA has reached the point that we can better appreciate the contradictions inherent in the Gills Creek. On one hand, we are much more aware of the ways in which water quality and wildlife have become degraded. Land development, insufficient understanding of natural environmental processes, and human carelessness have all played their part. On the other hand, the beauty and function of the Gills Creek have become more visible – through awareness programs, restoration projects, and community engagement. These steps forward were only made possible through the interest and action of community members. And the GCWA expresses our sincere thanks for such essential support.

So now we realize that an immense amount of work lies ahead, and we are working to answer these questions: Where is it possible to have the most impact, and what are the Watershed's most urgent needs? To the first question, we now know better how to identify and analyze the degrading impacts on the Watershed and correct them. We have the experience of collaboration among community groups, local governments, schools, and concerned citizens – and the power that they collectively bring to hard challenges. To the second, we also now have some clear targets for improvement – ranging from additional stream restoration projects to floodplain preservation to creation of beautiful and enriching experiences alongside a vibrant, healthy Gills Creek.

Such aspirations are possible through community dedication, hard work, and a collective appreciation of the wonderful resource that is in our care. We eagerly look forward to our next twenty years of partnership and community service.