

# THE HISTORY & EVOLUTION OF



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## THEN & NOW

**Watershed** has a long, rich history in our region. This year, 2024, marks 40 years since the group was officially established. Its mission has remained the same since the beginning: to protect the water resources of Springfield and Greene County through projects and education.

Today, Watershed's team is growing in numbers, diversity, and capacity. The Watershed roster includes over 20 employees and many more seasonal and part-time staff. Internships are hosted through local universities and AmeriCorps. Programs are personalized to educate a wide spectrum of ages and interest levels. Watershed intends to create a future where water users and enjoyers are informed and engaged.

Watershed collaborates with local partners to offer hands-on learning, access to native plants, conservation technician crews, and assist landowners in implementing best management practices. The Ozarks is celebrated for its clear springs and intricate karst features, including caves and sinkholes. This delicate landscape presents a distinctive challenge in maintaining healthy water systems. Our predecessors demonstrated great foresight in addressing this issue. Their vision has proven invaluable and remains at the heart of Watershed's mission.

# LOOKING BACK

The impact of Watershed would not be possible without the support of a dedicated community and productive partnerships. But how did it all begin? How did it evolve into what it is today? And most importantly, why? Let's journey back in time, before the inception of Watershed, even before the existence of City Utilities.

In 1883, the first public waterworks, the Springfield Water Company, was established at Fullbright Spring. A dam was constructed in the 1850s at Sanders Spring, just upstream from Fullbright, to power the McCracken Mill grist mill. The Springfield Water Company later acquired this area in 1899. It is now known as the Valley Water Mill. During this period and into the early 20th century, many people migrated to the Ozarks, and Springfield experienced a significant increase in population. Steve Pokin of the *Springfield News-Leader* says, "The mill, surrounding property, and spring played an important chapter in the growth of Springfield in the late 1800s and early 1900s." This era saw rapid urban expansion for Springfield, with its population tripling from 6,500 to 22,000 people between 1880 and 1890.

Realizing the uniquely sensitive water supply, the City of Springfield created a board of Water Commissioners in 1937. The board was responsible for overseeing the anticipated municipal drinking water system. In 1955, Fellows Lake Dam was constructed, creating another water reservoir. It still provides a quarter of Springfield's water supply today.



**City of Springfield's first Board of Water Commissioners in 1937**



**Valley Water Mill Dam (1950s)**

After many years of negotiation, the City of Springfield purchased Consumers Water Company in 1957 and transferred its operations to City Utilities. They also bought the Valley Water Mill Lake and the surrounding area, later named Valley Water Mill Park. Today, the park is jointly managed by City Utilities, Watershed, and the Springfield-Greene County Park Board.

# THE WHY

Fast-forward to the 1980s, when Springfield experienced another population boom. The area's drinking water was and continues to be sourced from the James River, Fellows Lake, McDaniel Lake, and Fulbright Spring. Rapid urban development threatened drinking water supplies as plans to construct numerous homes with septic tanks and wells near Fellows Lake emerged. This led local officials to become concerned about the future of Springfield's water supply. Simultaneously, the water supply had a taste and odor episode due to algae blooms, which can result from nutrients such as fertilizer and septic waste in the waterways.

Because of these threats, the City of Springfield assembled a Watershed Task Force. The Task Force's sponsors could see that rapid urban growth threatened the water we depend on for a vibrant economy and healthy community. The Task Force examined threats from septic tanks and urban runoff and made recommendations for the city and county.

Among the Task Force recommendations was to form a Watershed Management Coordinating Committee. This group would review proposed developments in the watershed and make recommendations to city and county governing bodies. It had no taxing or regulatory authority. Despite these sensible recommendations, some in the development sector opposed them.

The Watershed Management Coordinating Committee would serve as a public advocate for water quality. They would "develop public information and education capabilities regarding watershed management," overseeing the protection of Springfield's drinking water. It would be composed of representatives appointed from local governmental jurisdictions in the watershed.



Newspaper articles detail nearby algae bloom incidents

# STAYIN' ALIVE

Thus came the inception of the “Watershed Management Coordinating Committee” (WMCC), a joint effort of **the City of Springfield, Greene County, and City Utilities**, formed in August 1984 to study water pollution issues in the Springfield area. Nearly a year later, these sponsors would assess the success of the group, conducting a sunset review to determine if the Committee would continue.

Though the formation of the Committee was initially controversial, officials recognized its importance. When it was time to evaluate the Committee’s progress and decide whether to continue, many articles were published in favor of continuing the Committee’s efforts. An article titled *Water Group Deserves to Live* stated, “The Committee and its administrators have made earnest efforts at fact-finding to help us understand how we who live on top of the earth influence factors beneath the surface of the earth. It should be easy to chart its work, for the quality of our water will be the determining factor” (1986).

In June 1986, the Committee sought a year-long extension. The Greene County Commission held a vote with a 2-1 majority, offering a six-month extension as a compromise. During the extension, the Committee continued its efforts to safeguard the water supply. They did so by proposing revisions to building development regulations and community programs focused on water protection.

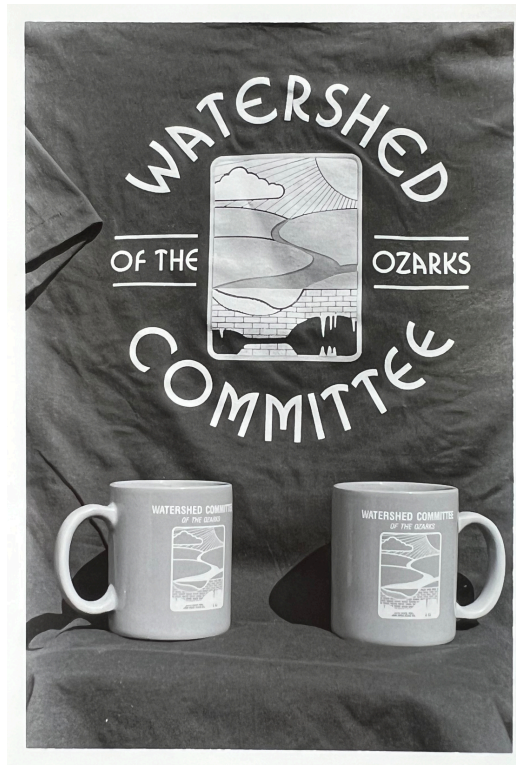


# WATERSHED COMMITTEE INC.

In 1989, the WMCC was renamed and officially incorporated as the Watershed Committee of the Ozarks. To keep the group citizen-based, the sponsors appointed non-governmental representatives to a six-member board.

The Committee was initially formed out of necessity, gaining public support and recognition along the way. Over time, the scope of the Watershed Committee's work shifted from zoning policy meetings to annual water conferences, community outreach festivals, and grant projects.

Through this evolution came a sense of community and culture. There were just two full-time positions in its first years as a non-profit organization and it leaned on voluntary "water warriors" to accomplish its mission. The Committee relied on small grant awards and sponsor support from the City of Springfield, Greene County, and City Utilities. The group continued gaining momentum in the water world. In 1997, they received the Groundwater Guardian Award from the Groundwater Foundation.



Watershed Committee of the Ozarks original branding (1989)

## The early days of Watershed Committee



Pictured left to right: Russ Campbell, Gary Pendergrass, Joan Adams, Saul Nuccitelli, Loring Bullard, Ruth Johnson, Barbara Becker, Dr. Barry Ivy

# WATERSHED COMMITTEE INC.

In 1999, the Committee began offering educational tours of Jordan Creek, highlighting Springfield's water infrastructure history. The Watershed Committee also hosted monthly breakfast meetings, offering a platform for discussion on water-related issues. This tradition began in 1985 and continues today.

Understanding the importance of the community's involvement in hands-on watershed improvement, the Committee worked with partners to launch the Adopt-a-Spring program, urging citizens to help monitor groundwater quality. This was one of many volunteer opportunities made available through the Watershed Committee and its partnerships.



**Aerial View of Valley Water Mill Property in 1950s**



**Water Supply Protection Area Road Sign**

The early 2000s were transformative for the Watershed Committee of the Ozarks. Then Executive Director Loring Bullard and his board envisioned a massive opportunity at the historic Valley Water Mill property.

The park is a beautiful representation of the Ozarks' natural features, including streams, springs, a lake, caves, sinkholes, and diverse habitats. However, an abundance of work was required to make the park the innovative conservation and demonstration site it has become today.

# VALLEY WATER MILL PARK

In 2002, the Watershed Committee began restoration efforts at Valley Water Mill Park with federal funding and the Valley Water Mill 319 grant. A management plan was developed to implement best practices, enhancing the health of the forest and its wildlife habitat.



**The Watershed Center**

In 2011, the Watershed Committee opened the C.W. Titus Education Facility. Known as the Watershed Center, it became a place to experience nature while learning about our watersheds and the importance of stewardship. The facility boasts education, demonstration, and recreation all wrapped into one. Park patrons enjoy a variety of activities there, among them birding. 189 bird species have been reported at Valley Water Mill Park, including three threatened species, the Northern Harrier, Snowy Egret, and Peregrine Falcon, illustrating the importance of the location to migrating and nesting birds.



**Missouri Bladderpod flower  
at Valley Water Mill Park**

In 2017, the Missouri bladderpod, a winter annual, which is federally endangered, was discovered in the park's glade. It had been several years since it had been seen there, but prescribed burns brought the species into bloom. The Watershed Committee's Executive Director, Mike Kromrey, remembers when they first spotted the plants blooming on the glade, "After we

had done the restoration work in the glade that following spring, we were greeted by this blanket of beautiful little yellow flowers, the Missouri bladderpod. And that is one of the most powerful experiences I've had in my career. It was really like getting a high five from Mother Nature. We did all this work, and it was really hard, but we got this signal that restoration is happening, and the bladderpod is back."

# BEYOND THE MILL

Just down the road from Valley Water Mill Park is the Onsite Wastewater Training Center. This is a demonstration site for new and innovative wastewater controls, which can be compared to more traditional designs. These models benefit builders, county permittees, and planners. The facility was made possible through the Community Onsite Wastewater and Stormwater grant received in 2006. Educational features at this site show the importance of proper septic installation and maintenance in preventing nonpoint source pollution.

The Watershed Committee also worked with partners to create the Little Sac Grazing Demonstration, which showcases riparian protection, rotational grazing, warm and cool-season pastures, and alternative watering systems. The site is used for classes, tours, and scientific study and offers sub-leases to local farmers. The land sits between Fellows and McDaniel Lakes.



**National Wastewater Conference attendees visit the OWTC in 2023**



**High School Career Day at Onsite Wastewater Training Center in 2023**

The Committee’s restoration efforts go beyond the Valley Water Mill neighborhood. They offer guidance and expertise to the entire community. Watershed works to engage people of all backgrounds and age groups, providing school field trips, workshops, professional engagement opportunities, and guidance for municipalities.

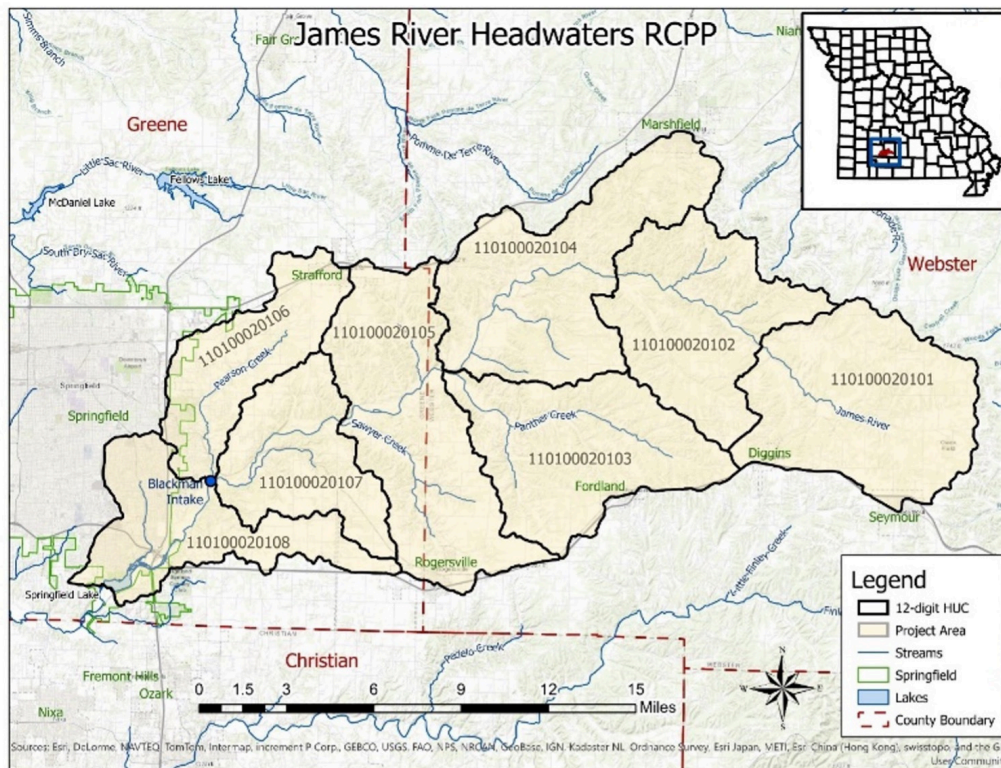


# REACHING FURTHER

In 2014, the Watershed Committee created a Source Water Protection Plan for the area. It focused on pollution prevention and action goals that can be taken on an individual and systemic level.

In 2021, Watershed took on a lead role in the USDA's Regional Conservation Partnership Project (RCPP) throughout the James River Headwaters. It works with partners, including farmers, ranchers, landowners, and other stakeholders, to implement conservation practices that improve water quality, soil health, wildlife habitat, and overall ecosystem resilience.

The Committee continues offering support for landowners and farmers, helping them find resources and funding to improve their land, including planting native vegetation and cover crops to stabilize eroding streambanks.



# MILESTONE ACHIEVEMENTS

With each project completed and partnership forged, the Watershed Committee gained momentum. This propelled them to take on larger grant projects and expand their impact.



**Over 65 community impact projects**

Watershed has also strengthened education and outreach efforts through experiential programs, engaging field trips, and proactive outreach initiatives that cultivate a generation of more informed and connected water users. They adopt a holistic approach by advocating for water-smart practices, promoting native landscaping, combatting invasive species, leading streambank restoration projects, and encouraging mindful recreation, to name a few.



**Unlocked \$9.9 Million in grant funding for community projects**



**5,000 students engaged in field trips at the Watershed Center each year**

The organization strives to ensure a sustainable future and clean water for generations to come. By partnering with communities and leveraging collective efforts, Watershed's reach and impact expanded, driving positive changes for both local waterways and communities.

For an overview of the Watershed Committee's accomplishments, one can explore their completed and in-progress projects, detailed in their annual reports and available on [watershedcommittee.org](http://watershedcommittee.org).

# THE NOW

Forty years after its formation, Watershed flourishes with a wealth of diverse projects, staff, funding, and community support. Watershed has expanded its efforts to include these programs:

**Watershed Natives Nursery** cultivates native plant species for conservation projects and community members to support biodiversity, healthy soil, and clean water. Watershed Natives has a large educational component, involving high schoolers and employing interns from local colleges to provide important job skill training and networking opportunities.

**Watershed Conservation Corps** employs young professionals as conservation technicians to equip them with training and field experience. Restoration services are provided to local municipalities, businesses, and partners, such as the National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service.

**Fellows Lake** is managed through a partnership between Watershed, City Utilities, and Ozark Greenways. Specifically, Watershed leases Miller Park and operates Fellows Lake LLC, providing the greater Springfield community with access to boating, fishing, and education about the lake, which is Springfield’s primary drinking water source.



Watershed continues working with partners to improve water, onsite wastewater, and habitat health education. The group assists landowners and agencies in land restoration and protection. They are also piloting the **Restore the Ozarks Initiative**, which acquires degraded land to rehabilitate it, benefitting the environment and economy.

## PEOPLE, PLANET, PROFIT



# LOOKING AHEAD

At the heart of Watershed is a vision to protect and preserve the Ozarks. The mission of protecting clean water through projects and education remains relevant and urgent due to Springfield's ongoing population growth and increasing water demand.

Watershed continues working to improve the health of our water resources for generations to come. Our work is not just about maintaining the status quo but about scaling our efforts to meet the evolving environmental challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. This commitment is vital to sustaining the health and economic vitality of our community, ensuring that both people and nature can thrive in harmony.



**Join in!** Together, we can make a lasting impact on our environment. Get involved in Watershed's programs, volunteer opportunities, and events to help protect and improve the Ozarks' water. To learn more and join in, scan the code below, or visit our website at [www.watershedcommittee.org](http://www.watershedcommittee.org).

