

# Increasing Awareness and Uncovering History of Sperry Park

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## Project Purpose

Local politics and understanding public interest and perspectives is critical for management and advocacy of local recreational areas, as an ideal municipality should take into consideration their constituents' values and opinions, especially concerning public land use.

As such, **my project focused on assessing public awareness, recreational use, and knowledge of the history of Sperry Park**, a park and nature preserve in Woodbridge, Connecticut. I was concerned with understanding how local land is used, managed, and the ways in which land use regulations are followed by the public. Additionally, I wanted to uncover some of the little-known history of Sperry Park, namely that it is likely the former residence of an enslaved person named Alexander. I asked participants if they would be interested in participating in a Witness Stone Project as a way to honor this history and educate visitors of Sperry Park.

Along the way, both through research of Sperry Park and involvement in town meetings regarding the park, these historical unknowns and lack of recognition seemed to be the most pressing issue and interesting aspect of the park – in that they provided an opportunity to educate my town and broader community on a notable aspect of its history.

## Sperry Park History & Witness Stone Project

The land of Sperry Park was donated to the Town of Woodbridge from the Sperry family in 1907 to be preserved as a rural park. **Sperry Park was a home to some of the original settlers in the Woodbridge Area**, and in 1781, **Revolutionary War Sgt. Nathaniel Sperry filed manumission papers to set free an enslaved person named Alexander**. Alexander may have lived at this location with the Sperry family in the mid-1700s – but more research of historical records is needed.

This is where the **Witness Stones Project** comes in. According to its website, *"The Witness Stones Project™ is an educational initiative whose mission is to restore the history and honor the humanity of the enslaved individuals who helped build our communities."*

*The Project provides local archival research, professional teacher development, a classroom curriculum, and public programming to help students discover and chronicle the local history of slavery. The final component of the work in each community is the placement of Witness Stone Memorials™ that honor enslaved individuals where they lived, worked, or worshiped."*



Sperry Falls in Woodbridge, CT

## Planning and Distributing the Survey

In planning my survey, I **met with the Sperry Park Committee** to approve the survey contents and assess what town interest might be. Creating the survey took multiple drafts. I created **two main sections in the survey: recreation & historical awareness**. My survey questions took a variety of forms – scaled, multiple choice, and checkbox questions – in order to generate accurate and specific data for the questions I was asking. To distribute the survey, I contacted my local newspaper to publicize the survey and posted it on town Facebook pages and the Sperry Park website. By these methods, I was able to receive **nearly two hundred responses** from residents, a large enough sample size to conclude about local interests, activities, and opinions on Sperry Park.

## Survey Results

### Noteworthy data I collected from my survey:

- I received a total of 193 responses to my survey
- 58% of participants were from Woodbridge, CT, 33% were from Bethany CT, and 7% were from Orange, CT (Neighboring towns of Woodbridge)
- >75% of survey participants were aware of Sperry Park**, and **~2/3rds had visited** (Fig. 1)
- Most participants correctly identified the prohibited activities as prohibited, however, some admitted to participating in them previously (namely, swimming)
- Fewer participants (a minority) knew about the history of Sperry Park** (Fig. 2), and **even less knew about the Witness Stones Project**, which the Sperry Park Committee and I proposed as a way to memorialize the potential history of enslavement at Sperry Park
- Most supported a Witness Stones Project in Sperry Park** (only 5% said no to the idea of a Witness Stones Memorial), and a majority (70%) said they would visit Sperry Park to see a Witness Stones Memorial (Fig. 3)



The Falls at Sperry Park



Sign at Sperry Park

Fig 1: Survey Question: Have you ever visited Sperry Park?  
193 responses

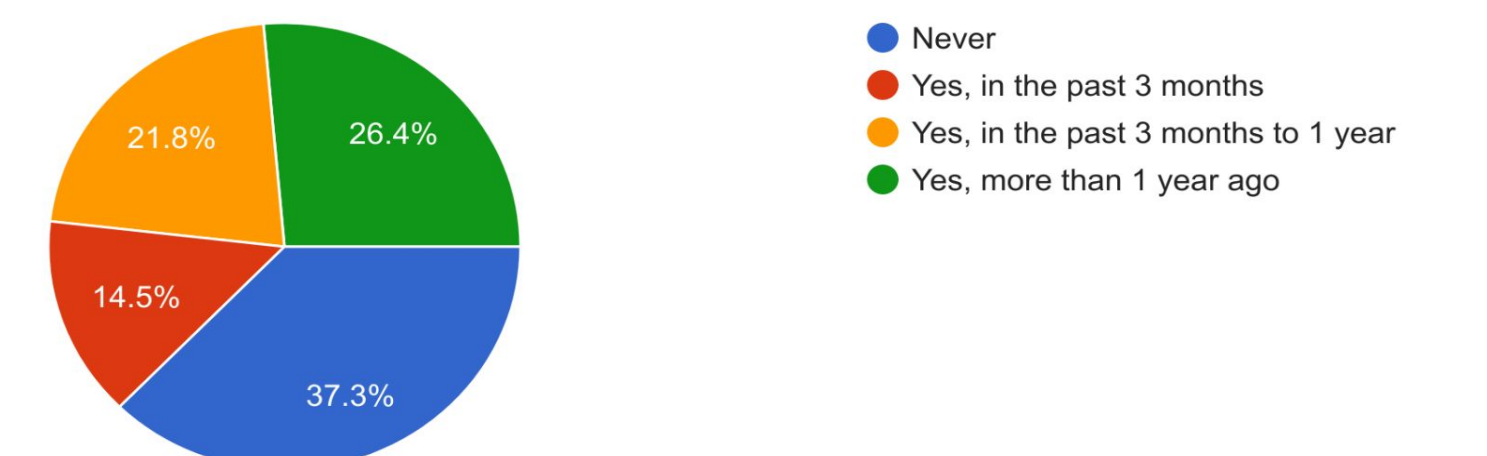


Fig 2: Survey Question: To what extent are you aware of the history of Sperry Park?  
193 responses

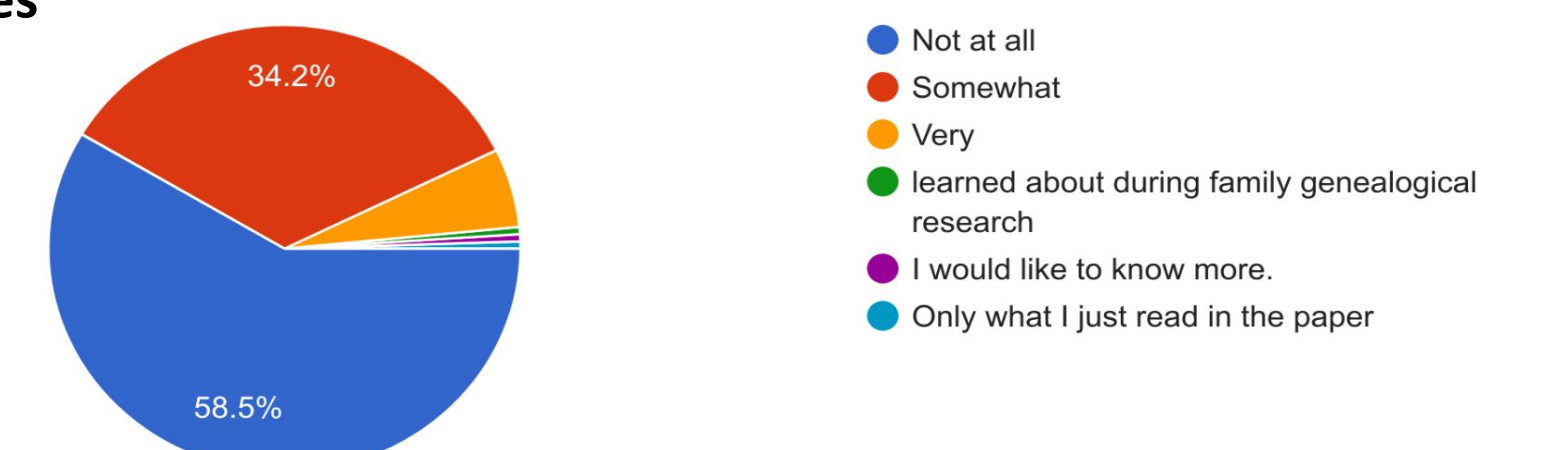
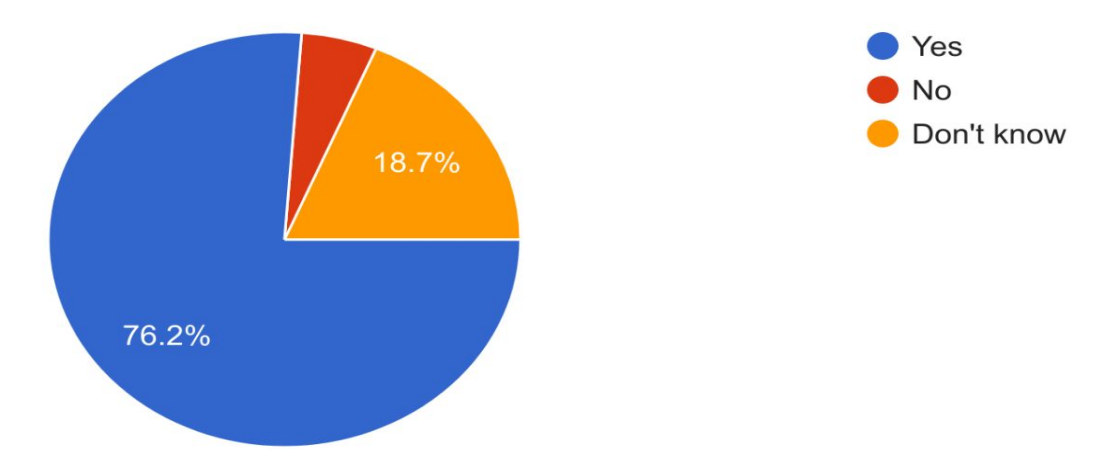


Fig 3: Survey Question: If it can be documented that an enslaved person lived at Sperry Park, would you like to see a Witness Stones Project there?  
193 responses



## Community Partnership

**Getting involved with my municipality was one of my priorities** and one of the most important aspects of this project. I wanted to find a way to learn more about my area and the people that live there; working with **Sheila McCreven** and the **Sperry Park Committee**, as well as **Tim Austin** from the **Woodbridge Conservation Commission**, helped me navigate the survey process. Developing connections with municipal leaders and committees helped me to gain awareness of the rich history that Sperry Park holds. On a practical level, the Sperry Park Committee and my community partners helped me to frame my survey, get it approved, and get it distributed to the community – and therefore assess awareness of use, history, and interest in Sperry Park.



*A clipping of an article on the survey published in the Woodbridge Town News in February 2023. Scan the QR code to see my survey!*

## Conclusion and Next Steps

Based on the data I collected from my survey, the vast majority of local participants would support and visit a future Witness Stones Project. The next step will be to use the feedback I got in my survey to **continue to work with the Sperry Park Committee in researching the history of Sperry Park, and then creating a Witness Stones Project** to further memorialize the likely history of enslavement that took place at Sperry Park. I would also love to do more research into the history of Sperry Park, both of the homesteads, people, and nature that lived there.



*Some of the original Sperrys who lived on this land, circa 1890. I was shown this photo through research on the history of Sperry Park.*

## Acknowledgements and References

This project would not have been possible without help from both UConn NRCA and my community partners in Woodbridge. I would like to thank Laura Cisneros, Erin McKeehan and everyone else from UConn NRCA for all of their assistance in inspiring me and helping me plan this survey and project. Additionally, I would like to thank Tim Austin for helping me navigate municipal committees and helping me find a path to get my survey produced. Lastly, I would like to thank Sheila McCreven, John Adamovich, and the rest of the Sperry Park Committee for helping to educate me on Sperry Park, as well as helping to develop and promote my survey.

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