

## Mystic River Watershed (Historical Overview) by Mary Hendrickson

The Mohegans and Pequots named the river 'Missi-tuk' which means 'a large river whose waters are driven into waves by tides or wind.'<sup>(1)</sup> The First Peoples who inhabited this land found abundant natural resources. Its proximity to Long Island Sound and an abundance of game, shellfish, finfish and waterfowl, made it an ideal location. The river was bountiful and is considered sacred by the tribes.

The Mystic River Watershed begins at Lantern Hill, now part of the Mashantucket reservation. In her book published in 1895, Frances Manwaring Caulkins mentions 'The hill's white quartz cliffs are said to shine in sunlight when viewed from the Atlantic Ocean.'<sup>(2)</sup> This sacred hill would shed its waters to form a stream which flowed into Lantern Hill Pond, Long Pond, Hyde Pond and Whitford Brook before reaching the village of Old Mystic, becoming the Mystic River. It was a spawning ground for alewife, blueback herring and the American eel.

South of the I 95 highway bridge is a nature area called 'Peace Sanctuary'. Historically, this area was anything but peaceful. One of the most dreadful atrocities of early colonial America, the Pequot Massacre, occurred near here on May 26, 1637. Under the leadership of John Mason, Captain Underhill and Uncas, Sachem of the Mohegan tribe, between four to seven hundred Pequots were slaughtered and their fort destroyed. Today the English attempt to eradicate the Pequot would be termed genocide. As reward, John Mason who led the colonists was granted five hundred acres on the eastern side of the Mystic River. More land grants were awarded to individuals who fought alongside Captain John Mason. Some of these names, Gallup, Williams, Dennison, Burrows are still familiar to the locals as place names near and around Mystic.

John Winthrop Jr., sent by his father from Massachusetts to settle Southeastern Connecticut, was said to have established one of the first mills along Whitford Brook. Industries along the watershed included textile mills as well as shipbuilding, for which Mystic is most noted. Maritime ventures at Adams' Point, Pistol Point and Noank secured the local economy until the mid 1800's when steam powered boats began to be made in southern port cities. The production of textiles then became the foremost industry with the manufacturing of wool and cotton and eventually velvet until the mid- 20th century.

Although now most associate Mystic with its shops and bascule bridge, originally Mystic was based at the head of the river now called Old Mystic. Here, many houses from the 18th Century still stand gracefully. As industry and population grew, land was developed down river as Mystic Bridge on the eastern bank and Portersville on the west. According to Helen Clark, the young diarist of Mystic in the early 20th Century, the tourist industry began after people discovered the area's landscape beauty while attending meetings of the Universal Peace Union on the western bank of the river (now Groton).<sup>(3)</sup>

In 1913, American Impressionist painter Charles Davis established the Mystic Art Colony, which became the Mystic Art Museum and still continues as exhibition space and art education facility. Mystic Seaport, a maritime museum on the eastern bank of the river was established in 1929 as the Marine Historical Association. It was one of the first living history museums in America.

With this background of early settlement, shipbuilding, industry and visual art it is no wonder that this area continues to be a tourist destination. Mystic's popularity continues to grow as its' tidal marshes and inland wetland areas shrink. Parking lots of Mystic Seaport were once tidal marshes that accepted the river overflow during storms. On both sides of the Mystic river where there were once low-lying grasses, a natural habitat for many species of wildlife, marinas and high-end housing continue to be developed. The railroad bridges and viaducts did much to displace natural flow of the water in Mystic as well as many areas along the coast. A new community boat house will soon be built on the site of the Rossie Velvet Mill's coal delivery dock. The contaminated landfill will be capped to create a public park. Once a marsh, efforts to restore some of it are being developed. There is a growing effort to understand how to make the watershed more resilient to global warming and increased storm activity but because of the location's popularity, development continues. How the structures, new and historic, will be able to stand up to global warming in the future is a substantial problem yet to be fully investigated.

Notes:

1 <https://oldmystichistory.org/copy-2/>

2 Frances Caulkins, History of New London Connecticut: From the First Survey of the Coast in 1612 to 1860, H D Utley, 1895

3 Helen May Clarke, An Account of My Life 1915-1926, The Childhood Journals of Helen May Clarke of Mystic Connecticut, The Mystic River Historical Society, 1997

More To Investigate:

Rudy J. Favretti, Jumping the puddle: Zoldani to America, 2002

Leigh Fought, A History of Mystic, Connecticut: From Pequot Village to Tourist Town (Brief History), History Press, 2007

William N. Peterson, Mystic Built: Ships and Shipyards of the Mystic River, Connecticut, 1784-1919, Mystic Seaport Museum, 1989