

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.'⁽¹⁾ The First Peoples who inhabited this land evolved with abundant natural resources. Its proximity to Long Island Sound and an abundance of game, shellfish, finfish and waterfowl, made it an ideal location for thriving. The river was bountiful and is considered sacred by the tribes.

The Mystic River Watershed begins north of Lantern Hill. 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.'⁽²⁾ This hill sacred to the Pequots sheds its waters to form a stream that flows into Lantern Hill Pond, Long and Bush Ponds, and Whitford Brook (previously named Mystic River) before reaching the village of Old Mystic and joining Haley's Brook and then the Mystic River Estuary. It was a spawning ground for alewife and blueback herring and home to plentiful American eel, all species of concern today.

The Pequot Massacre occurred on "Pequot Hill" on May 26, 1637, during the Pequot War. Under the leadership of Captain John Mason, Captain Underhill, and Uncas, Sachem of the Mohegan tribe, between four to seven hundred Pequot warriors and their families were slaughtered as their fort burned. As a reward, John Mason 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, Denison, and Burrows are still familiar to the locals as place names near and around Mystic. The Treaty of Hartford (1638) officially declared the Pequots ended, and divided the 200 or so survivors, adding them to the rolls of Mohegans and Narragansetts. This is why there are both Mashantucket (Western) and Eastern Pequots today. The tribal reservations were created in the 1660s, extending from their present locations all the way to Long Island Sound in patchwork fashion, with agents of the CT Assembly in charge of the land.

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-1800s 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, the land was developed downriver 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 (still the "Peace Sanctuary," stewarded by Denison-Pequotsepos Nature Center, on River Road in Groton, open to the public for hiking).⁽³⁾

In 1913, American Impressionist painter Charles Davis established the Mystic Art Colony, which became the Mystic Art Museum and still continues as an 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. Once the wooden whaling ship *Charles W. Morgan* arrived in need of restoration in 1941, Mystic Seaport Museum became one of the first living history museums in America and a global leader in wooden/historic ship restoration.

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 the 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 rising waters 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