

# The Mill River Flows to the Sound

In light of the controversial removal of the dam and waterfall just above the Main Street Bridge, plus the major changes planned for the park surrounding it, we thought it might be timely to write about the history of the river and how it got its name.

First, let's clear up some confusion: Mill River is the name given the Rippowam River by early settlers because of the many mills that stood along its banks, powered by its mighty flow. There were sawmills, gristmills, wire mills, rolling mills and fulling mills (a process for treating woolen cloth using fuller's earth, a claylike product.)

The river runs diagonally across Stamford from the northeast corner where Pound Ridge and New Canaan meet to the southwest where the river flows into Long Island Sound near the Pulaski Street Bridge. Much of its water is now captured by two large reservoirs owned by Aquarion, a private company, and piped to serve much of Stamford and parts of Greenwich. Until the late 19th century, except for places where it was dammed-up for power, it flowed unimpeded to the sound. The oft-quoted 1929 "Plan of a Metropolitan Suburb, Stamford, Connecticut," by Herbert Swan, envisioned a park along its entire length and three quarters of a century later, the concept is still alive.

In 1957, Virginia Otto authored a well-researched article about early mills for "The Stamford Historian," a booklet published by the Stamford Historical Society.

She wrote:

*"Early gristmills were built on a stream at a place where the water could be dammed up to furnish power to turn a great water wheel. These 16- to 18-foot wheels were located in a pit outside the two or three-storied building. As water flowed through a gate from the sluiceway below the dam and hit against the paddle of the great overshot wheel, the wheel turned."*

Mrs. Otto went on to describe how power was transferred to flat, circular grinding stones, an example of which can be seen in the yard of the 1699 Hoyt Barnum House on Bedford Street.



Photo donated by Doris Martin

*Property owners along the river complained frequently about the environmental problems created by the woolen mills including draining the river during times of drought. A report of the period claimed "A fire, which totally destroyed the woolen company plant, in 1886, removed the nuisance."*

Stamford's first mill, a gristmill erected by Samuel Swain in 1641 (the year Stamford was founded,) stood on the east side of the river at Main Street, powered by the dam and waterfall presently scheduled to be removed. George Washington, in his published diaries, refers to the waterfall which he saw on a visit to Stamford in 1789:

*"...but one of the prettiest things of this kind is at Stamford, occasioned also by damming the water for their mills; it is near 100 yds. in width, and the water not being of a proper height, and the rays of the sun striking upon it as we passed, had a pretty effect upon the foaming water as it fell."*  
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The water power created by the Main Street dam was subsequently used by the Rippowam Iron Works and later by the Harding - Smith Woolen Mills, one of Stamford's principal industries from 1867 to its loss in a disastrous fire in 1886.

Many of Stamford's earliest water-powered mills were sawmills, as necessary to early settlers as gristmills. A large water wheel transmitted power to a saw that cut only on the downstroke and took approximately twenty minutes to saw one board off a log. Sawmills were extremely portable, enabling them to be moved elsewhere when the nearby supply of trees was exhausted.

From 19th-century maps, we know the location of five or so of the mills that once stood along the Mill River, although the whereabouts of others remain a mystery. To the best of our knowledge, no mill building remains in Stamford with the exception of a very well-hidden structure at the corner of Mill and Old Long Ridge Roads. The best example of an 18th-century mill, the Newman Mill, stood along the Mianus River until it was burned to the ground by vandals in the late 1960s, shortly before restoration was to begin.

Starting from the northwest corner, where Stamford, Pound Ridge and New Canaan come together, we encounter the Dantown Mill, established in 1745 at a site later flooded to create the Laurel Reservoir. An 1867 map shows the mill to be located just over the town line in New Canaan. Mrs. Otto says that its foundation stones may still be seen off Trinity Pass. Oral legend has it that the site became home to an illegal still during Prohibition and its location, straddling the border of New York and Connecticut, conveniently allowed occupants to evade arrest by crossing from one state to the other when law enforcement officials appeared.

As we follow the river southward, we pass a once-flourishing mill located on the west side of the river just below the bridge that connects Cascade Road with New Canaan. Both a sawmill and a gristmill, it was erected in the 1760s,

later becoming a "turning mill" that used local hardwoods, "chestnut, hickory and oak" to make turned knobs and chair rungs, as well as "night sticks for New York policemen."

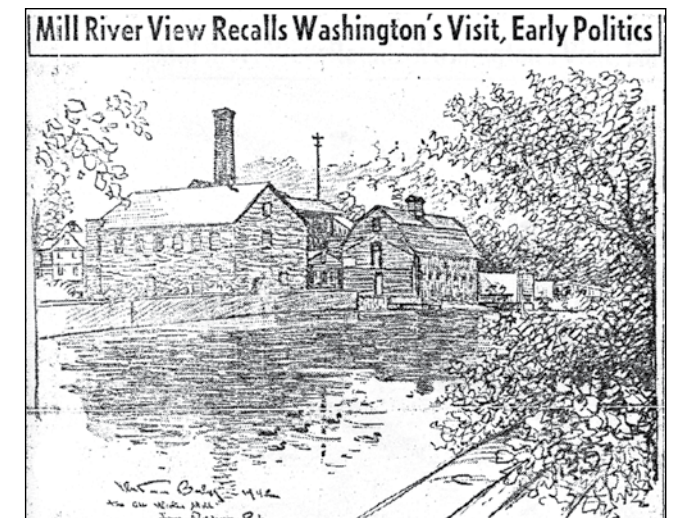
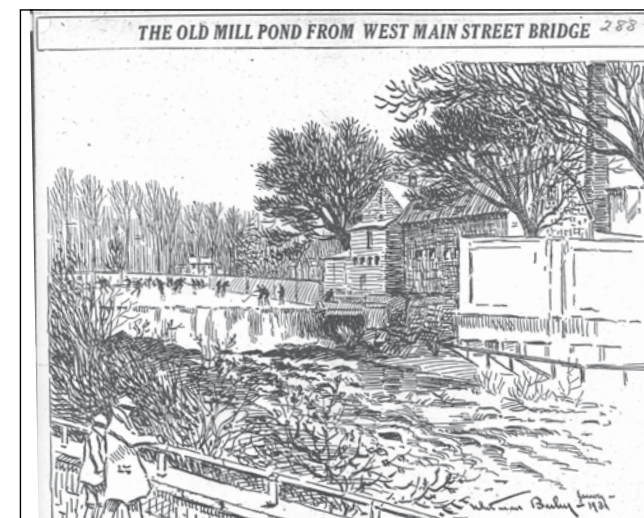
The next major mill we encounter in our trip down the Mill River is the wire mill that gives Wire Mill Road its name. It stood on the west bank, just north of the bridge on Cedar Heights Road. The 1867 map shows another mill, possibly a sawmill, on the east bank. These mills were a major source of local employment and led to economic distress in the area when they closed down. An Advocate article from 1892 referred to the now prosperous North Stamford neighborhood as "Poverty Row."

As the river proceeds south along Stillwater Road, we encounter the Stillwater Rolling Mills, originally a gristmill site and most likely involved in processing iron and steel into items such as horseshoes and wire. According to the 1867 map, the mill appears to have been located between Stillwater Road and the river near the present Cold Spring Road Bridge; it was one of several mills in the area.

Further downstream, we pass the original gristmill site at the Main Street Bridge which we wrote of earlier, and below that we encounter another well-known early mill, a gristmill built by Peter and Anthony Demill in the 17th century on the east bank just below the Pulaski Street Bridge. Although nothing remains of the mill itself, the owners' house stood until several years ago on Pulaski Street, next to the recently-demolished red-brick factory with the McCalls sign on its roof.

Mrs. Otto's article refers to two other mills whose whereabouts are unknown to us. One mill, dating back to the late 1600s, was known as "Webb's Mill," supposedly located on

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Whitman Bailey drawings courtesy Stamford Historical Society



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the Mill River “just north of the Country Road.” Another puzzler is a multi-purpose mill established by Joshua Hoit along “Toilsome Brook,” a waterway that still exists. In 1683 Hoit received the right to make a dam and set up a “fulling mill” as well as a mill to make oatmeal. More interestingly, he also received the right to erect a windmill on the site, the only known record of wind power in Stamford.

We hope that our readers may offer additional information - even corrections - regarding these early mills and their locations. In the future, we will discuss the mills along the Mianus River, not as plentiful as those on the Rippowam, but significant as well.

*“Progress has brought about mechanization to cope with man’s problem of securing his lumber and his grain. But still the waterways of Stamford will continue to make their way to the sea past silent sycamores, over mossy dam stones - while timbers and artifacts lie in dampness, awaiting discovery by the interested archeologist or historian.”*

-Virginia Darling Otto (Mrs. Robert W. Otto),  
“Early Mills At Stamford,” 1957



*A drawing by Whitman Bailey in the September 18, 1926, edition of the Stamford Advocate shows the Pulaski Street Bridge (then called the Oliver Street Bridge) with the remains of a tidal mill dam underneath.*

## We Need Your Dollars and Your Data!

Assuming the money remains in the State’s budget, The Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism is expected to award the Historic Neighborhood Preservation Program, Inc., a Basic Operating Support Grant of up to \$23,000. We say “up” to \$23,000 because we need to match the money in order to receive it and are counting on our readers to help out. One of the projects this money will support is the creation of a **Web site** and an **e-mail hotline**. So, if in addition to donations, you will send us your e-mail address, we can keep you informed of current preservation issues in Stamford.