

Unit VII:

*Cultural Resources
in the Watershed*

Unit VII Cultural Resources Introduction

Cultural Resources are the people of the watershed and their products.

Little is known of the Narrow River Watershed prior to the early European settlement, since the Native Americans in the region did not leave a written history. Humans first inhabited this area between 3,000 and 10,000 years ago, after the last glacier receded. At the time of the arrival of the first Europeans in the early 1500s, the Narrow River Watershed was inhabited by the Narragansett and Niantic Tribes. Living in large, semi-permanent coastal villages, the Native Americans used the rich natural resources of the Narrow River Watershed for food and shelter. Clams, scallops, and oysters were harvested from the estuary; anadromous fish such as herring and shad were caught from streams during the spawning runs; and crops such as corn, squash, and beans were grown in the agricultural fields surrounding their villages. In addition to using the resources close to the estuary, the Narragansetts and Niantics also hunted game and gathered other food in the upland portions of the watershed. Besides their main villages, the Native Americans occupied other settlements in the Watershed on a seasonal basis. Hunting camps were maintained in the forest, while camps and gardens in the coastal plain were used in the summer. At the time of early European contact, the Narragansetts were the largest and most powerful of the tribes in New England and were also reputed to be the best farmers. Their domain was concentrated in southern Rhode Island, including South Kingstown, Narragansett and the Bay Islands.

European merchants began arriving in the Narrow River Watershed during the early seventeenth century. They traded with the Narragansett tribes, exchanging cloth and arms for fur. During the mid-seventeenth century, Jireh Bull built the first European trading post in the Watershed on the east slope of Tower Hill, near the Pettaquamscutt River. Settlers soon began arriving, drawn by the Watershed's bountiful natural resources. In 1658, a group of European settlers bought a large portion of the watershed from three Narragansett sachems. This treaty is known as the Pettaquamscutt Purchase, and Treaty Rock Park off Rte. 1 in South Kingstown marks the historic site of this purchase. The rest of the watershed was purchased from the Narragansetts in 1659. Some of the land had already been cleared by the Narragansetts, and for a short time Europeans and the Native Americans lived side-by-side sharing the land and its resources. The Narragansetts helped the newcomers farm and shared their harvest.

Within forty years of the first European settlement in Rhode Island, the local Narragansett population declined. Disease decimated many villages, while the open fields attracted larger numbers of settlers. Colonial settlers took advantage of tribal instability and took control of the land. The few Narragansetts who survived disease and loss of territory and family continued to live in the area. Tension and conflict between the settlers and Native Americans escalated, due, in part, to the greed of a group of Massachusetts land owners who wanted to extend their holdings. "Rhode Island found itself victim of a war it neither instigated nor declared."¹ No one knows who actually

¹ Schultz and Tougias. 1999. King Phillips War. page 4

started the war, but it gave the Massachusetts land owners an excuse to intensify aggression against the Narragansetts and Wampanoags. Jireh Bull's garrison house near the Pettaquamscutt River was attacked and burned in December 1675. Shortly after that, the first major fight of King Phillip's War took place in South Kingstown, RI. Massachusetts and Plymouth forces marched to Canochet's Fort, the Narragansetts' winter quarters in the Great Swamp. Hundreds of Native Americans, mainly women, children, and the elderly, were slaughtered when the colonials fought their way into the fort and then set fire to the buildings. Canochet, the Narragansett chief, escaped and joined forces with Metacomet, or King Philip, of the Wampanoags. In April 1676, Canochet was captured and executed by Connecticut soldiers and their Pequot allies. The battles continued until August 1676 when Metacomet was killed. Canochet is commemorated by a statue near the Narragansett Pier post office. Local tradition states that the grassy plain near the south end of Pettaquamscutt Cove was Canonchet's favorite campground. A Memorial to the Great Swamp Fight is located along Rte. 2 in South Kingstown.

With the end of King Philip's War, the settlers turned their energy to rebuilding their settlements and clearing the land. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, large rural estates were created in the Watershed. An aristocratic society unique for New England, known as the "Narragansett Planters," evolved based on expansive landholdings. These landholdings entailed agriculture and the use of a large labor force, including tenants, hired hands, indentured servants, and American Indian and African slaves. South Kingstown had the highest number of slaves in the colony. The Narragansett Planters exported farm products such as horses (the Narragansett Pacer is a well-known breed that originated in Narragansett), cattle, cheese, and tobacco to places as far away as the Caribbean. For almost a century, the Narragansett Planters provided the base for the area's economy, peaking in the 1740's and 1750's. Estate subdivision, reduction of the West Indies trade, and a fluctuating currency in the American colonies brought an end to the Narragansett social and economic system just before the American Revolution. Slavery also ceased, first voluntarily, and then through legislation. During this period, smaller farms were created throughout much of the Watershed, and agriculture remained the dominant economic activity well into the nineteenth century. Fishing was also an important economic activity in the Narrow River Watershed. Alewives, bass, smelt, white perch, oysters, clams, and scallops were exported to cities around the East Coast. In addition, muskrat, otter, mink, and other wildlife and waterfowl were hunted and trapped in local wetlands and sold at markets around New England.

Unlike most areas in Rhode Island, the Narrow River Watershed was not heavily industrialized during the Industrial Revolution. Because the watershed lacked streams large enough to generate power for large factories, its tributaries were never harnessed for anything larger than a few snuff or other small mills. However, in the early 1800's shipbuilding became a major industry along the River. Many centerboard vessels were built here and used for trade with the West Indies.

Agriculture and maritime pursuits remained important aspects of the Watershed's economy, augmented by growing tourism. Portions of the Narrow River Watershed

became a predominant summer resort during the 1900's. Attracted by the nearby fashionable resort, Narragansett Pier, and by the lovely countryside, summer visitors began visiting the Watershed. Soon, visitors began building second homes in the Watershed. This area remained a popular seaside resort well into the early twentieth century, until the 1938 hurricane and other factors brought an end to the resort hotel era. The local economy slumped, and it wasn't until the post-war period in the 1950's that the economy began to improve. Since the 1950's, the year-round population in the Narrow River Watershed has grown quickly. Improved roads and automobiles made it possible for Watershed residents to work in Providence yet live in the Watershed. Summer houses have been converted into year-round homes, resulting in a Watershed that is predominately residential.

The population has continued to grow in the Narrow River Watershed. As it has grown, new roads and new developments have also been built, changing the face of the Watershed permanently. Remnants of an agricultural past can still be found throughout the Watershed. Large portions remain undeveloped due to land use constraints such as steep slopes. Most of the densely developed areas occur in the lower portions of the Watershed, often along the River. Despite the continuing suburbanization of the Watershed, residents continue to depend on the Narrow River estuary for a variety of uses. Sometimes these uses are in conflict with each other. All residents of the Watershed need to manage the resources of the Watershed to protect the long-term health of the Narrow River Watershed and its residents.

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Other Resources:

The Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center, located on the Mashantucket Pequot reservation near Ledyard, Connecticut, is a marvelous source of information and resources concerning the history and culture of the Native American tribes who inhabited southern New England. In addition to the Museum exhibits, they offer a wide variety of educational resources, including libraries, on-site and in-school classroom programs, and field trips. Visit their web page at www.pequotmuseum.org for more information about their programs.

NOTE: “The History of (your watershed here)” should discuss the history of your watershed, the land in and around it, and the people who have lived there, including how people have used the land. This description should begin with Native Americans and end with the present. This whole document is an example.

The History of the Flat River Watershed

Like most of New England, the Flat River Reservoir Watershed has undergone dramatic changes over time. This is most obvious in relation to changes in the landscape and water uses. From the time of the Native Americans and early European settlers, the watershed has been transformed from wilderness to mill towns to a modern day mixed-use residential environ of Providence.

Thousands of years before the first known settlements by the English were made in Coventry, the ancestors of the Narragansett Indians inhabited this area. Beginning between 10,000 and 12,000 years ago after the last glacier receded, people presumably lived in the Flat River Reservoir watershed much as they did elsewhere in the region. At this time Southern New England was a bleak sub-arctic landscape populated by nomadic bands of herd followers which relied on wild plants and animals for their sustenance, and which used the coastal and interior areas at different times of the year to take advantage of the seasonal availability of different foods and other necessities. During the late spring and summer, people lived along the coast, harvesting herring and shellfish. As fall set in and winter approached, the group would journey inland for dependable supplies of firewood and favored hunting grounds. By 1000 AD, the Indians were beginning to supplement their diet with domestic crops. As agriculture was gradually adopted, corn, squash, beans and pumpkins were cultivated.

As they had no written language or recorded history, little of the lives of these early inhabitants and their descendents met by the European colonists, is known outside of a few site excavations and the writings of early explorers. We do know that at the time of the Shawomut Purchase in 1642, when a large section of land which included the present Towns of Coventry, West Warwick, and most of Warwick was acquired by a group of twelve men for the equivalent in wampum of thirty-six English Pounds, branches of the Narragansetts including the Nipume, Scatacoke, Aqueednuck, Quidnick, Mishnick and Tippecansett camped along the Flat River area. They hunted turkey, fox, deer, wolves and bear, which were in abundance in the western section of the present-day town, which encompasses the Flat River Reservoir watershed.

Within forty years of the first European settlement in Rhode Island, the local Narragansett population declined. Disease decimated many villages, while the open fields attracted larger numbers of settlers. Colonial settlers took advantage of tribal instability and took control of the land, naming many of their towns after the Native Populations. Early settlers displaced the Native Americans from the bountiful land, and cleared the area for pasture. Numerous stone walls still mark the efforts of the area’s early farmers. The few Narragansetts who survived disease, loss of territory and family, continued to live in the area. Angry at the changes that had occurred since Europeans first arrived, the

Narragansetts launched frequent raids on European settlements. Raids continued until 1675, culminating with King Philip's War, a war initiated by a Wampanoag Tribal leader named Metacomet (also known as King Philip). The war ended in 1675 with the massacre of most of the Narragansetts, in the battle at Great Swamp. Today the remaining Narragansetts in Rhode Island reside on their territory in Charlestown.

With the end of King Philip's War in 1677, the settlers turned their energy onto rebuilding their settlements and clearing the land. The numerous brooks and waterways, including the Flat River, called so because it falls no more than 16 inches per mile, were used to build grist and saw mills, and development in Coventry grew around its mills, although throughout the Colonial era Coventry's main economic activity was agriculture. Average farms were 100 – 150 acres and supported one or two horses, along with one or two yokes of oxen, fifteen head of cattle including five dairy cows, fifteen swine and a large number of sheep. The raising of sheep was especially popular as the animals provided meat, leather and most importantly wool, which most families carded, spun and wove into cloth on their own.

Over time the population in the Shawmut purchase area grew, more than doubling by the middle of the 18th Century, which resulted in increased westward movement of settlers in search of arable land and the establishment of Coventry as Rhode Island's 16th incorporated township in 1741. At that time there were known to be about 100 European families living in the Coventry wilderness area, and a number of small mill villages had developed mostly located along the banks of the Pawtuxet in the eastern part of the town, and fanning more sparsely to the west. Many of these villages are still existent in Coventry today. Washington, Quidnick, and Anthony are some of the more familiar ones and Shoethread, now called Coventry Center, which is located just inside the Flat River Reservoir watershed line.

Following the Revolutionary War were hard times for Coventry farmers, as was the case in all of Rhode Island. Various schemes to ameliorate the problems of farms selling for a ¼ of their price, including the printing of paper money and mortgage programs involving the new currency, ultimately failed and as the 18th Century moved into the 19th the industrial emphasis in Coventry shifted to the mills. As the mills developed so too did societal infrastructure – roads, schools and churches, eventually the railroads, and so too did the problems of land and water abuse develop, and by the Great Depression the region was already faced with a declining textile industry and unproductive farmlands.

Unlike most areas in Rhode Island, the Flat River Reservoir watershed was not heavily industrialized during the Industrial Revolution. Because of the lack of fall in the Flat River, the watershed's tributaries were never harnessed for anything larger than a few small mills. Modern day development is further limited by the lack of proper sewage treatment facilities and to this day land use is mainly residential. Rapid population growth in the area has been and remains the most pressing issue as the towns around the watershed transformed from decaying mill towns to most suburban environments.

ACTIVITY I: GUEST SPEAKERS

OBJECTIVE: Students will gain a historical perspective of the watershed. They will learn how it has played a vital role in the lives of past residents, and how it has changed throughout history, from pre-colonial times to the industrial age.

METHOD: Special guest speakers present information to the students. As follow-up, students are asked to write stories based on their own historical research.

MATERIALS: Historic tales related to the watershed, excerpts from diaries, historic records, photographs, etc., paper and pencils.

PROCEDURE:

1. Invite a member of the (**a local Native American tribe name here** [*Narragansett*]) Indian Tribe to speak to the students about their culture and history.*
2. Invite a member from the local historical society to discuss the history of the area, including the history of (**local historical land uses** [*mills, cranberry bogs, settlements, and early industrialization*]) in the watershed.
3. Invite a long term resident of the watershed who can speak about the recent past and the changes they have seen over the years. (This may be a student's grandparent.)
4. You may also want to invite a representative from the planning office of the watershed town to speak about development issues.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What may the (**a local Native American tribe name here** [*Narragansetts*]) have used the rivers and reservoirs for that we no longer use them for? (Transportation, many domestic water uses) Why? What changes have occurred?
2. What do the bodies of water in the watershed still provide for us today that were also important to the (**a local Native American tribe name here** [*Narragansetts*])? (drinking water, fishing, recreation)
3. How did the (**a local Native American tribe name here** [*Narragansetts*]) and Europeans differ in their use of the rivers, reservoirs, and streams? What did the European settlers use the watershed for?
4. What were the historical uses of the (**the body of water your watershed drains into** [*Flat River Reservoir*]), streams and the surrounding area? How did these uses influence the lives of the people and wildlife in the watershed?
5. What changes have taken place in regards to human uses over time? What happened to the (**a historic land use in your watershed area** [*mills*]) in the watershed? How

did these changes affect life in the towns in the watershed? What effects have historical uses had upon the environment over the years?

6. How does the water quality of the (**the body of water your watershed drains into** [*Flat River Reservoir*]) compare to 200 years ago? How does it compare to 30 years ago?

* Representatives for the (**a local Native American tribe name here** [*Narragansett Indian Tribe*]):

(description of and contact information for a local Native American tribe representative [*Ella Sekatau does slide show presentations about tribal history and culture and can be reached at P.O. Box 268, Charlestown, RI 02813, (401) 364-1111*]).

* (**description of and contact information for a local historian** [*Bill Johnson from the Slater Historic Site, Roosevelt Ave. Pawtucket, RI (401) 725-8638 has resources and information about historic mills in Rhode Island*]).

* Contact your local office of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service for additional sources of historical information on the watershed.

ACTIVITY II: CREATIVE WRITING BASED ON HISTORIC RESEARCH

1. Search out historic records, diary excerpts, photographs, etc. from your local town hall and/or library. Look especially for information pertaining to historic uses and those people involved thereof. Distribute materials to students.
2. Based on their research, ask students to write a fictitious diary excerpt of a person who lived in the watershed at a particular time period, or ask students to make up a story about the origin of a particular place name in the watershed.

ORAL HISTORIES OF THE WATERSHED:

1. Have students interview older people in their community about the changes they have witnessed in the watershed. Have students work in pairs to design questionnaires. Questions may include:
 - a. How long have you lived in this community?
 - b. Have you ever lived near any of the rivers or reservoirs in the watershed?
 - c. What do you remember about the reservoir or river when you were my age?
 - d. How did the water body and the surrounding land change since then?
 - e. How did you and other members of the community use the river or reservoir?
 - f. What are your feelings about the river or reservoir today?
2. Have each pair of students write a summary about how their waterways have changed over time and how the community has been affected by the changes.
3. Have the students put together a “Book of Quotes” about what older people in the community have said about change in community waterways. If possible, add pictures from old newspapers to help illustrate how the watershed has changed over time.
4. How will learning about the history of the watershed help you plan for the future?

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ACTIVITY III: LEGACY DRAMA/DISCUSSION

This is an example of a program that can be brought into the classroom to examine cultural issues.

The RI Legacy program brings historic events to life. An actor and actress will make a 20 minute dramatization of events leading up to the creation of the Scituate Reservoir to provide a water supply for the city of Providence. This was a very controversial event because the reservoir, which was the largest artificial lake in New England at the time, changed the Scituate village community so much.

To give your students an idea of the main issues presented in the play, you could try the following visualization activity which takes about 20 minutes:

1. Tell your students you are going to place them in the year 1900, and that some of the students will live in Scituate and the rest will live in Providence.
2. Choose 3 students to represent the approximately 3,000 residents of Scituate in the year 1900. Place these students in the classroom so that they have about two-thirds of the space. This is the rural community of Scituate on 52 square acres of land. Point out on one classroom wall the family owned farm of resident 1 that has been passed down through the generations, the family owned mill of resident 2, and the general store operated by resident 3. Since several villages make up the town of Scituate, point out that each village has a church, a tavern, and a grange hall (for square dancing and community meetings) that make up the social center.
3. Now choose 16 students to represent the approximately 16,000 residents of the city of Providence. They must occupy one third of the classroom. Tell the students this is the busy and growing city of Providence crowded on only 18 square miles, one of the largest 20 cities in the United States. Point out along the wall of the classroom Gorham Silver Company which makes fine silverware, Brown and Sharpe (which makes tools), the Fruit of the Loom cotton textile mill, a busy downtown department store district featuring such stores as the Outlet company, jewelry companies, and a financial district. Along another wall, point out the busy harbor filled with ships carrying goods up and down the East Coast. On the floor of the classroom, point to the railroad tracks that help make Providence a major area of New England commerce. On the front wall, point out the movie house where customers can see a movie for 5 cents, the vaudeville theater which costs a dime to attend, and the opera house.

Now show the trolley tracks that lead from Scituate to Providence where Scituate residents travel to Providence for entertainment or even work.

Explain that unfortunately the water supply in Providence is contaminated from sewage and mill wastes being dumped into the Pawtuxet River which is their water supply. (The mill owners upstream had once built the privies for their employees right over the river!)

4. Now tell all the students that it is February 20, 1914 and the Providence Journal has just printed the news that that city of Providence is planning to take over by “eminent domain” over 20 squared miles of Scituate (about one fifth of the town) to build a reservoir to supply Providence with water. Some land speculators with advance knowledge of the impending reservoir construction have already bought parcels of land in Scituate at relatively low prices knowing that the price will go up as Providence acquires the land.

QUESTIONS:

1. How do the people of Scituate feel about losing their farms and their mills?
2. What would they lose if the reservoir is built? (Discuss what community means.)
3. How might they react? (The truth is the people of Scituate did stage a protest but finally gave in because the wealthy mill owners were willing to be bought out. Eventually, everyone was bought out.)
4. Why do the people of Providence feel justified in taking the land to build the reservoir? (Is it ethically correct to take the land of others for “the public good”?)
5. Are the actions of the land speculators with advanced information about the project ethical?

A detailed study guide is available from the RI Legacy Program if anyone would like to go into the historical issues in greater depth. Phone number 273-2250. This visualization activity was taken from information provided in the guide.