

# The Pomperaug River Watershed History Project

## *Exploring the Relationship of the Pomperaug River System to the Historical Development of “Old Woodbury”*

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Project Summary: January, 2008

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### **Problem**

The Pomperaug River system and its associated watershed in Northwest Connecticut is a valuable resource that has been influential in the development of the area. A relatively small area (90 square miles) with a complex geological history, the above and below ground water resources are valuable to the inhabitants currently living here, and played a part in the development – or lack of it – of the Pomperaug Valley towns of Woodbury, Southbury and Bethlehem..

Having secured the land through purchase starting in 1659, in the early 1670s a group from the Stratford Congregational Church traveled up the Housatonic River to the Pomperaug River Valley and created the settlement that later became Woodbury. Their choice of the site for their settlement, the first in this part of Connecticut, was largely related to the geology of the area, which provided fine soils for diverse activities. -

Protection, maintenance and enhancement of a natural resource require that people understand the value of the resource. While some people have this understanding, many do not. Unfortunately, most citizens today are not aware of the role the river has played in the past, nor of the influence that human activity has had on it. Efforts to educate the residents of the watershed, using scientific information to create and disseminate outreach materials have not yet raised the awareness of the population as a whole. It has been shown that effectively developing and sustaining a successful natural resource stewardship program requires a blending of history, culture and environmental knowledge-. Similar projects in areas such as the Salmon River in Oregon; Redding, Connecticut; and Columbia County, New York, have shown that this kind of activity can play an important role in the understanding, appreciation, and preservation of natural resources.-

The Pomperaug River Watershed Coalition (PRWC) has worked extensively to understand the watershed from scientific perspectives. PRWC is nationally recognized for the rigor of its studies and has made visible the significance of the watershed as a critical resource for the environmental health of the region. Now, however, PRWC recognizes the need to further emphasize the river’s importance by examining the social and cultural history of the watershed and the communities it has sustained and defined over time. PRWC also recognizes the need to broaden the constituency for the River in order to ensure informed stewardship now and in the future. Public awareness and scholarly understanding will help conservation efforts in the watershed, as people begin to understand that critical natural systems affect us on all levels and must be preserved.

## Project

PRWC is exploring the potential for planning and implementing the Pomperaug River Watershed History Project (“The Project”), which will add cultural and historical knowledge to its scientific understanding of the river and watershed. Through a phased effort, including documentation, interpretation and dissemination, The Project will study the role of the Pomperaug River and its tributaries in the economic and social history of the three towns in the region which encompass the bulk of the watershed. Inherently interdisciplinary, The Project will reflect current trends to engage the perspectives of varied scholars and professionals in the interpretation of a place, region or natural resource.

The project will be divided into phases. A *planning phase* will involve convening representatives of local organizations to gain their insights and commitment to assist as appropriate with research and dissemination. PRWC will also convene a small group of advisors with scholarly or professional expertise to help shape the research and guide the interpretation of findings for the purposes of public education.

A *research phase* will involve the use of an experienced local researcher to draw on the texts, images and memories available in the town records, historical societies, museums, town libraries, and land trusts in the Pomperaug River watershed, as well as identifying remaining physical evidence. The initial research will result in an inventory of structures and land use changes, with other human interventions that have had an impact on the Pomperaug River and its tributaries. Structures will include such things as mills, dams and bridges; while changes in land use will track the rise and fall of agriculture, small industry, mining, transportation corridors, and deforestation-reforestation, along with settlement patterns and town center development.

This inventory will overlay the work already completed to map the geology and soils of the area, generalized current land use, and existing dams and wells. In addition, an inventory of the historical resources relating to the River will be compiled as documentation. The planning and research phases will culminate with the publication of a 25-page booklet marking the sites of the structures found and the kinds of activities that took place in the watershed. The booklet will contain primarily raw data and preliminary analysis, providing guideposts for further work. The Coalition’s website will be updated to include the information gathered. A public program to mark the launch of the report will also be developed to promote the project.

In the *interpretation phase* project staff will work with scholars and other advisors to synthesize the material compiled and to define the patterns of the relationship between the watershed and the communities it supported. They will create a framework for understanding the interplay between the region’s social and economic evolution and the River’s ongoing evolution as a defining feature of the area. Project staff will then create one or more products for public education and outreach. The final *dissemination phase* may result in multiple products, which could include: an exhibit that can travel to the towns in the watershed; an illustrated booklet; a database of sites and structures; a video; public programs at libraries, nature centers and other appropriate venues; and a component of the PRWC website that will join cultural and scientific evidence about the watershed.

## Goals

The Project has three primary purposes:

- Identify and increase access to the materials in local repositories that shed light on the relationship between the social and natural history of the watershed region.
- Create public understanding of the relationship between the river and its people since the settlement of “Old Woodbury.”<sup>iv</sup>
- Foster citizen responsibility for the future of the watershed.

A corollary benefit of the project will be the opportunity for cooperation between and among members of local historical, educational and environmental groups. Local agencies with differing resources and missions will be invited to partner as co-sponsors in this project, providing the opportunity to participate in a shared endeavor and creating a sense of community that can extend beyond town borders and interest groups. The general public will have a comprehensive body of research to draw on for information, understanding, and appreciation of their communities. Local officials will have information about historical, natural and archaeological resources to assist them in planning and other decision-making efforts.

## PRWC

PRWC is a 501(c)(3) that was incorporated in 2000 to address concerns about the quantity and quality of water in the watershed. It has focused on developing a sound scientific basis for use by its members, which includes the towns, water utilities, industry, land trusts and conservation organizations. As stated in the PRWC Management Plan the coalition will provide:

***a forum for stakeholders and the community to discuss issues in a non-regulatory environment; and by educating the public, government (local, state and federal) and business communities about the importance of a healthy river system and our collective role in its protection.***

The Coalition is governed by a board of 30 people with Dr. Marc Taylor, chairman; Joe Eisenberg, vice-chairman; Eileen Denver, secretary and Cindy Hunt-Stowell, Treasurer. Edward Edelson is the Executive Director. Other board members are listed on our web site: [www.pomperaug.org](http://www.pomperaug.org). The PRWC's operating budget is approximately \$180,000. [This can fluctuate from year to year depending on grants received for scientific work, which is typically done by third parties with the required expertise.] The operating budget is focused on reaching out to the community (town officials and commissions, schools, other non-profit organizations) with our scientific findings.

Based on the work of Dr. Comp noted above, the PRWC believes that integrating the science with the history and culture of the area is an important next step to ensure our watersheds

remaining viable resources into the future, and a model for other regions to use in developing their own understanding of the human dynamic in natural systems.

i Cothren, William History of Ancient Woodbury, 1854, pp. 18-20 “The face of the country throughout the territory is of an undulating character, being pleasantly diversified with hill and dale. It is well watered with numerous streams...furnishing an excellent water-power for numerous manufacturing establishments. Upon the rivers and streams there are intervals of considerable extent , and other level tracts in the many valleys. The soil is generally a gravelly, and in some places a calcareous loam, warm and fertile, well adapted to the production of corn and the various kinds of grain. The lands are good for grazing purposes, and favorable for fruit of the various kinds. Valuable orchards of apples, pears, cherries, peaches and other fruit trees abound.

“On the whole, Woodbury may be considered a good agricultural and manufacturing town, and our forefathers may well have congratulated themselves, that their “lines had fallen to them in pleasant places”.”

ii See T. Allan Comp PhD, a historian who works in the US Department of the Interior's Office of Surface Mining. His projects to restore river systems has been based on grass root involvement by blending history, culture, art and environmental sciences. *"While science dominates restoration thought, it seems increasingly clear that science is necessary, but it's not sufficient - and neither is art. I think this ... can help establish a clear role for artists and humanists, not as solitary visionaries, but as participants; not as some mystical or magical process, but as an important, critical perspective; not as arbitrator, but as coworker, one among many disciplines equally necessary to the recovery and revitalization of this whole place."*--T. Allan Comp, Ph.D. - Crowley Creek Collaboration Project Director

iii See websites <http://www.hawthornevalleyfarm.org/fep/fep.htm> ; <http://highstead.net/> ; and <http://www.sitkacenter.org/6-0.html>

iv Old Woodbury refers to the towns of Southbury, Woodbury, Bethlehem and Washington