

FRWA Curriculum Guide

Week IV - High School

Going Back to the Past

Going Back to the Past Background Information

“I came where the river ran over stones; my ears knew an early joy. And all the waters of the streams sang in my veins that summer day” – Theodore Rothke, The Waking, 1948

The Farmington River Watershed is rich with history. Evidence of early inhabitants is shown throughout the watershed and the formation of the land, itself is reflected in its geology. The Farmington River provided a home for early inhabitants in the valley. The Native Americans called the river, Wattunkshausepo, “the fast, flowing winding river”. The Europeans later shortened it to Tunxis, “the beautiful river that ripples down through the hills”. The land was forested and the river abounded in salmon, American shad, alewives, sea lamprey, sturgeon and other fish that fed the tribes that lived here. Native Americans lived in different areas of the watershed and some tribes were considered nomadic. They lived by the river to fish, planted corn in small, forest clearings and hunted in the woods.

In the area going through Avon, Burlington, Canton, and Farmington, through the abrupt northerly bend in the river, a large group of Tunxis Natives were located there when English settlers arrived in the 1600’s. In Simsbury, the meadows that line the river were planted by the Indians and called Nod Lands.

In the 1600’s English settlers moved to valley where Poquonock Natives lived at the mouth of Farmington River, known today as Windsor. Settlers moved to other areas, such as plantations in Simsbury (known as Massaco) and at Tunxis (known now as Farmington). They depended on river for food. They planted crops and used river for transportation.

When building dams and mills, settlers disturbed Native American fishing and prevented salmon and other fish from moving upstream to spawn. The forests were clear cut for farmland and pastures were fenced off. This created a hostile situation, and wars emerged. The Indians were no match to the settlers rifles, so they retaliated by burning towns. King Phillip (Anglicized name) or Chief Metacomet gave the orders to burn the city of Simsbury in 1676 in retaliation to the settlers. The Tariffville Gorge was once traversed by settlers from Windsor going to Simsbury and back again to escape the raids of the Wampanoags.

In New Hartford, the name of “Satan’s Kingdom” comes from the lawlessness of the local population, as it was inhabited by prisoners and exiles. One of the first bridges to go across the river in this section was marched across by soldiers on their way to Boston during the Revolutionary War.

During the 1800’s, industrialism emerged. The invention of machinery and the development of mass production in factories were prevalent during this time period. In 1820, the quality of the water was degraded because of paper and cotton mills, tanneries, and saw mills dumping wastes into various rivers (Clam, Sandy Brook, Nepaug). In Windsor, the river was a port-of-entry for trade with England and the West Indies until a bridge was constructed crossing the Connecticut River in 1809. Mills were situated along the river in Windsor, similar to other towns in the 1800’s. Factories manufacturing textiles, yarns, and paper goods were located in Windsor as well as three electricity generating plants.

One historical landmark still visible today is the remnants of an aqueduct in Farmington. As part of the Farmington Canal built on July 4, 1825, it stretched from New Haven, CT to Westfield, MA and then 10 years later to Northampton, MA. The transportation link remained in operation until the railroad made it obsolete. Now, all the tracks have been removed from the rail bed and it is being

slowly converted to a park area. The path is being paved much of the way and is frequented by cyclists and hikers.

During the mid-19th century, depression caused mills to shut down along the Farmington River. The east and west branch of Salmon Brook were, however, spared pollution. The trout located in the Salmon Brook helped sustain renewal of upper river stocking programs because it was not polluted during the industrialism as other rivers had been.

There has been an active effort to protect the river since 1950's to present. The 1955 flood, carried away houses, railroad bridges and buildings. The devastation inspired the construction of major flood control reservoirs. Additionally, factories installed waste water treatment systems to reduce pollution, floodplain regulations were implemented, and laws went into effect, such as the Clean Water Act of 1972. Because of the laws and other factors affecting the protection of the rivers and waterways being instituted, the Farmington River conservation and renewal efforts have been met with success.

Geological formations and remnants from glacial activities provide a look into the past. According to the Farmington River Guide, dated 2002, "the steep ridges from Otis to Colebrook literally tumble into the Farmington forcing it to twist and turn and often obstructing it with boulders". The vertical cuts in bedrock overlooking the Colebrook Reservoir are more than 500 million years old, showing white streaks of magma in the rock. Continuing downstream through Barkhamsted approaching People's State Forest, the river turns east. Large hills rise up on both sides of the river. The south side of the hills are made of one-billion year old Precambrian rock.

In New Hartford, the mountains at Satan's Kingdom blocked water flow, creating a lake extending northwest for miles. Later, geological pressures forced water to cut through the rock, creating the formation of the gorge. During pre-glacial times, the Farmington flowed to join the Quinnipiac and emptied into New Haven. A glacial phenomenon was responsible for changing the direction of the river's flow. A wedge-shaped glacial deposit of debris or rock, called a moraine, slowed Farmington flow to south, causing the river to turn north.

A glacial lake eventually grew in size until it reached as far north as Tariffville. It was then able to top the ridge and cut a gorge which now permits the Farmington to drain into the Connecticut River in Windsor. A reminder of past times are the sand and gravel pits, effects of river and glacial deposits as well as Tariffville Gorge.

From Farmington to Simsbury, huge accumulations of rock debris, called talus slides, can be seen at the foot of Talcott Mountain. The mountain divides the valley floors of the Farmington and Connecticut Rivers and the ridge is the result of molten rock forced through the earth's crust.