The Acushnet River: A waterway that helped develop a nation

The history of the Acushnet River, of course, goes back to the time there wasn’t a sole strand of European DNA on the continent. Wampanoags were said to number approximately 12,000 individuals just prior to Bartholomew Gosnold’s arrival to the Smoking Rocks in 1602.

Within the Wampanoag tribe there was a small band of peoples called the “Cushenas.” They populated both sides of the Acushenagg River as it was called back then. Their name for this little spot of theirs was Cushenagg or Cushnea depending on the dialect.

Interestingly, the word “cushnea” means *“as far as the waters.”* This was the reply to Europeans when asking about the parcels of land they intended to purchase.



View Down A River (1853) by William Allen Wall (New Bedford Whaling Museum Photo)

Through interaction, particularly trading with the Cushenas, the earliest European settlers heard variants of words that contained the sound “cushen” when discussing the people, river, and land. It was only a matter of time before, Europeans would pick up the word and as normally happens with adopted words they become corrupt.

This isn’t a slag on the intellect of the earliest settlers, but an actual linguistic term for word transfer. Indeed, historical records show almost 50 variants were used by the Europeans. Within a few years, the early colonists commonly referred to the area as Cushnet Country, “Cushenagg Naighbourhood” or Cushena Plantations.

Over time, the word Acushnet evolved from those early corruptions. We have Acushnet Avenue, the town of Acushnet and the Acushnet River as reminders. Special note should be made to the whaling vessel, the “Acushnet” which Herman Melville actually worked on.

At the Start of an Early America

How important was this region to the area? To the nation? It was a figurative and literal lifeline. It was integral. It was a foundation of those earliest settlers. Waterways allow people to colonize. It’s redundant to say that water is needed for sustenance. We take its presence for granted since it is so readily available. However in the 17th century, it was the primary goal- and I can’t understate its importance enough -of every explorer, pioneer, settler or colonist. If you are the first person or group of explorers to a new land, the very first thing sought out is water.

People cannot fend for themselves, function, labor, or even think clearly without water as sustenance. Water is needed by the smithy to work his metal. Horse can’t be shod, arms can’t be built, repaired or utilized. Nails to hold homes together to protect people from the elements can’t be created. Homes on fire could not be extinguished. Food can’t be cooked without pots and pans to cook them in.

While food can be eaten without cutlery, society in the 17th and 18th century would have dictated that decorum and etiquette be had. While survival was the primary goal, a few luxuries could go a long way in boosting morale. All of these things, from survival necessities, luxuries to morale were impossible without water. The proverbial snowball effect applies. Let me reiterate the importance of water.



Head of the Acushnet River aka River's End (New Bedford Whaling Museum Photo)

Beyond the local and immediate needs that water served, to go further into to the interior, water was the highway. Shrubbery, forest, undergrowth, animals and natives were a barrier. Rivers were yesterday's highways. You were *on* the water you needed to function and survive. You didn't have to hack, hew and labor through dense forest, burning precious calories along the way. Animals could thoroughly be avoided. While Natives could not be avoided, there was a buffer of distance providing some safety. One could only be ambushed at a fair distance.

So whether you are an explorer, settler, or colonist you need to find a waterway so you can live, and a community can develop around it. The success of these first communities, not just here using the Acushnet River, but wherever they were, allowed the entire nation to develop. The Acushnet River was one of the first rivers to be utilized to allow these early communities to thrive.

The early communities developed from homestead to hamlet, to village, town, and city. This process of accretion was based

on that initial discovery of the waterway. The Acushnet River served many homesteads that would develop into larger communities along its 8.6-mile course, from its source at Long Pond in Lakeville to its emptying into Buzzard’s Bay. It has directly contributed to the success of New Bedford on its West Bank, Fairhaven on its East Bank, Lakeville, Freetown, and Acushnet. Indirectly it has allowed many more towns to thrive.

Progress Onward and Beyond

Once these communities began to grow and prosper, centuries later it would allow entire industries to exist from whaling, logging to textile. This meant a massive economic boon for the region. Unfortunately, with this burgeoning growth came the destruction and pollution of the river. Many people harbor anger towards the relatively modern companies and organizations that dumped PCBs and other chemicals into the river, making this historical and once gorgeous natural resource unswimmable and unusable as a food resource.



Quahogging on the Acushnet River (NB Whaling Museum Photo)

However, as early as 1899 the local Board of Health had declared that going for a dip would be detrimental to your health. It would have taken decades for it to get to that point. New Bedford's sewer pipes had been dumping directly into the river for years and caused a sort of karmic revenge in the form of a Typhoid Fever break-out infecting 575 people and killing 93 from eating shellfish. The Board of Health went from "Don't swim there." to "Don't swim or eat from there." In 1904 they closed the river to swimming, shellfishing, and fishing. Geez. Great timing fellas.

20th century Acushnet River; Today

Today it's hard to grasp. It seemed obvious and not requiring much common sense to not "shit where you eat." However, one has to chalk it up to the scientific understanding of the time and general ethos and psyche of society. Remember, there was a time when smoking was considered healthy, women weren't considered equal, children as young as 8 worked 50 hour work

weeks. This was the norm. Everyone dumped into rivers. One would be incorrect to think it was solely the big, bad, evil corporations that did the polluting. The general populace played a strong role in polluting the river.

They would toss refuse, garbage, tires, mattresses, or anything else they felt like. This was done since the first settlers and colonists. In spite of the fact that in 1904 the Board of Health closed the river to swimming and shellfishing, the Acushnet Processing Plant now known as The Acushnet Company went on dumping it’s chemical cocktails into the river anyway. A mixture of waste and re-processed tires.

In 1912 a new interceptor sewage line was built as a way to divert the sewage. Guess where this sewage dumped out? Clark’s Point. Hey, they said “No more dumping in the river.”, not “No more dumping in the sea.” Since pumping districts were still being built to keep up with demand, only some of the dumping into the river was halted. Only 5 pumping stations out of the needed nine were built.



Tan-Already dredged. Blue-Dredged in 2012. Orange-To be Dredged. (EPA Photo)

Here in the 1920s is where PCBs or Polychlorinated Biphenyls enter into the picture. They were brought here – have a seat for this one – the Monsanto Corporation who is responsible for their invention. Why the heck were they ever important? They were used as a coolant for electric motors, transformers and capacitors. One of the reasons PCBs never raised many alarms was because they are tasteless, and odorless. Scary stuff.

Problem is in spite of what seems to be a gentle liquid, it devours skin and it decomposes very slowly. Hence the predicament we are in today. These afore-mentioned pumping stations weren't resumed being built until 1947 and even when finished companies still dumped into the river. Oh boy. From 1939 until as recently as 1978 Aerovox Corporation was dumping PCB, polluting the land and water. Problem is that no one knew -or admitted they knew – that PCBs were bad for your health until a scientist in far away Sweden discovered they were. They were immediately banned by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). In 1973 they had banned it for some uses. This time it was total.

Closing

It wouldn't be until 1983 that the polluted parts of the Acushnet River would be designated a Superfund site by the EPA. This meant that the government would get involved in helping clean out natural resources that have been polluted and destroyed. By 1994, tens of thousands of cubic yards of PCBs had been removed from the sediment. By 2011, 200,000 cubic yards of an estimated 900,000 cubic yards have been removed.

We have a long way to go yet, before we see the gorgeous natural resource return to even a shadow of its former glory. Something I doubt I will see in my lifetime, but perhaps my daughter can tell her children that once upon a time the Acushnet River used to be polluted. They can turn to her and say "Oh mom. You're always pulling our leg."

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Photo Album Guide

01. Division of Pollution & Water Control taking samples in 1970. Spinner Publications Photo.

02. Warning signs in Portuguese and English in 1982. Spinner Publications Photo.

03. Typical pollution scene in 1971. Spinner Publications Photo.

04. Another pollution scene in 1971. Spinner Publications Photo.

05. Low tide in 1972. Spinner Publications Photo.

06. Testing by the Army Corp of Engineers in 1982. Spinner Publications Photo.

07. 1992 Hands Across the River Incineration Protest. Spinner Publications Photo.

08. 1192 Protest against incineration of the dredged PCBs. Spinner Publications Photo.

09. “Haying on the Acushnet River” by William Allen Wall. Painted as it was in 1850. This very spot is now the junction of Coggeshall and Rt. 195. Whaling Museum Photo.

10. Cushing’s Saw Mill at the head of the Acushnet River, Lund’s Corner. Whaling Museum Photo.

11. Sawmill on the Acushnet River. Whaling Museum Photo.

12. Sawmill on the Acushnet River. Whaling Museum Photo.

13. Couple sits by a small waterfall. Whaling Museum Photo.