



Volume 25, Issue 1    **The Raritan-Millstone Heritage Alliance**    Winter, 2021

## CHANGING TIDES

By Donald Johnstone Peck

Excerpted from a forthcoming book, "Changing Tides: Rediscovering Woodbridge, New Jersey 1665-1702"

Have you ever seen the Woodbridge River and its changing tides and thought of the challenges the first New England settlers faced as they disembarked from their sloops? Have you thought about their strength and courage in meeting those difficulties? This tidal river winds through a portion of land west of Staten Island known as early as 1624 by the Dutch name of "Achter Kol." It stretched from the Passaic to the Raritan Rivers and westward some thirty miles into the wilderness. It was to be later known as the Elizabethtown Purchase in a deed confirmed on December 1, 1664. Today the land surrounding the river is an important but well-kept almost secret nature sanctuary.

For generations before New England settlers arrived here from Newbury, Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Native Americans that inhabited these shores were an Algonquian speaking clan of the Lenni Lenape's sub clan Unami (Turtles) known as the Latelans which the Dutch and English translated as the Raritans. Migrating here each summer the local Raritans would hunt, farm and fish returning each fall and winter in the Easton area and Lehigh Valley of Pennsylvania. Their local native footpaths worn through forests would become some of the first roads of Woodbridge settlers.

Few today realize that the Woodbridge River drains what remains in this township of the prehistoric Lake Hackensack created by the last glacial ice sheet to cover this area. Now reduced to a preserve of tidal wetlands, this northernmost tip of New Jersey's Inner Coastal Plain was once part of the sea.

In the seventeenth century the Woodbridge River, then called by its Native American name "Papiack Creek" ("river of many bends,") was navigable from the Arthur Kill Sound as far as present-day Port Reading Road. Accompanied by blowing winds and mild moist air this shallow river with its inexorable tides provided a modest harbor for boats while the wide and fertile surrounding countryside gave way to productive farming.

Down among the marshes, the residence of early New Jersey mosquitos, choruses in great singing clouds soared and hovered over the rain-drenched grasses. At low tide Fiddler Crabs crawled in and out if their holes in the spongy mud.

This attractive and picturesque flowing stream with its several tributaries, meandered past green meadows dotted with Queen Ann's Lace and Loose Strife. In wet and dry seasons, it flowed through farms and the quiet way of life of the historic and picturesque village. There is something reminiscent of an English fens in the district around old Woodbridge, a long, winding estuary coursing down until it finally meets the changing rippling tide flowing in and out from the Arthur Kill Sound and Raritan Bay.

Although the tide moves up the river at a rate of 1.8 miles per hour, without any warning areas of tangled swampland and salt marsh have closed in on this stream. Except for the occasional seachant of sea gulls and the hollow scream of a great blue heron, standing as if on stilts patiently waiting for a catch, and the melancholy chirping of birds, there was silence and solitude in the early seventeenth century in of old Woodbridge.

(Continued on page 3)

## RMHA Annual Appeal Contributors 2020

Geoffrey P. Laura M. Bradshaw

Todd and Tara           Dubay

James P.                   Egan

Davis and Eunice       Folkerts

Susan D.                   Goldey

Barry and Carolyn      Graziano

Susan C.                  Keating

John and Karen         Keithler

C. Robert                 Kochek

Francis and Maria      Lutz

Fred D.                   Mueller

Carol                      Natarelli

Elwin and Portia       Orton

Donald J.                 Peck

Nancy L.                 Piwowar

Ronald N.                Pollack

Junelynn M.             Sadlowski

Joyce W.                 Smith

Barbara                 ten-Broeke

Nancy L.                 Zerbe

Located in the Woodbridge  
River system is

The Ernest L. Oros Wildlife Preserve  
a 97-acre Pin Oak Forest and Preserve  
located at the headwaters of the  
Woodbridge River system.

One of 32 facilities of the Middlesex  
County Park System it features

Hiking Trails, a Gazebo and  
Butterfly Garden.

[www.middlesexcountynj.gov](http://www.middlesexcountynj.gov)

[www.woodbridgeriverwatch.org](http://www.woodbridgeriverwatch.org)

## RARITAN-MILLSTONE HERITAGE ALLIANCE

P.O. Box 5583, Somerset, NJ 08875-5583  
[www.raritanmillstone.org](http://www.raritanmillstone.org)

*An organization of individuals,  
organizations, and sites working to promote pres-  
ervation and understanding of the rich, eventful,  
and cultural heritage of significant historical,  
educational, environmental and cultural sites  
located in Central New Jersey.*

### OFFICERS

President – Rev. Dr. Fred Mueller  
Vice President - Donald J. Peck  
Secretary – Christine Retz  
Treasurers – John and Karen Keithler

### DIRECTORS

Janena Benjamin  
Barbara ten Broeke  
Frank J. Crowe  
George B. Dawson  
Elyce M. Jennings  
Paul B. Jennings, MD  
Carol C. Natarelli  
Nancy A. Piwowar  
Rev. Canon Ronald N. Pollock  
Marilyn W. Rautio  
Tyreen A. Reuter  
Anurag K. Singh  
David A. Szilagyi

**The Board of Directors** meets on the third or  
fourth Saturday of March, May, September,  
November at designated historic and museum  
member sites in the region.

**The Executive Committee**  
meets in January and June

### YOUR LINK TO THE PUBLIC:

*The Link* is on a quarterly publication schedule. News  
of major upcoming events for possible placement in  
the newsletter may be mailed, emailed, or faxed to the  
following address. Any questions, please contact:

Donald J. Peck, Editor, The Clausen Company

P.O. Box 140,

Tel 732-738-1165

Fords, NJ 08863

Fax 732-738-1618

e-mail [clausenco@aol.com](mailto:clausenco@aol.com).

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of February, 1668, the Woodbridge Township Book recorded that the first “highway” (road) opened by the township ran by the “Kirk Green” and over the Papiack Creek and into the upland beyond. At the crossing of that road and Papiack Creek was to be the site of the first gristmill built in New Jersey, a tidal mill powered by the changing tides that had flowed in and out here for thousands upon thousands of years. Here was located Woodbridge Township’s first industry.

Tidal mills existed since the Middle Ages and some may date as far back as the Roman period in England. The tidal mill in Woodbridge, Suffolk, England, is a rare example of a tidal mill whose waterwheel still turns and is capable of grinding a wholemeal grain. It dates from 1170.

A tidal mill is a water mill driven by the changing tidal rise and fall. A dam with a sluice is created across an available tidal inlet, or a section of a river estuary is made into a reservoir. Here the rippling tide enters the millpond through a one-way gate until the vast reservoir is filled. The gate was closed automatically when the tide began to fall. When the tide was low enough, the stored water was released to turn a water wheel.

The old tidal mill, which stood on this site for years, grinding grain for the comfort of many generations, dusty cobwebs hanging from old pegged beams, was reported still standing as late as 1870. Long gone was the miller’s curledup cat, a descendant of several feline generations who had called the mill home. The area on either side of the road is much as it has always been, undeveloped, a salt marsh stretching for several miles in either direction.

Hope began to die down by the old mill during the final days of the nineteenth century. It was reported that the old timbers, marking the site of the ancient structure which supported the mill, had been reduced to a broken pile of rotting timbers. They had tumbled down into the silted waterway and were lying on the ground on the west side of the stream. Gone, never to return, were the millers and boatmen with their various sloops that had hauled the ground grain through inland waterways to points beyond.

A short distance from the foot of Trinity Lane is all that remains of this Dunham Mill site, surrounded by low wetlands in the fall and where tawny field grass still mingles with crisp brown dying ferns. The Dunham Mill is likely to be lost forever on the first road the township ever constructed. Next to the bridge that crosses the roadway, sinking out of sight forever, is all that is left – the memories of this first tidal mill site. The sunrise here still colors the sky from palest blue to dazzling gold. The tidal stream with its murmur of the changing ebbing and flowing of the tide that once knew busy days still flows on, swaying plants in the water’s flow.

As in the days when the Raritan Native Americans summered near here, the morning mist still shrouds the Woodbridge River with billows of clouds hiding the sun from view. The extensive tidal marsh still contains a paradise bird sanctuary among a profusion of plant life of tall grasses, swamp magnolia, yellow marsh marigolds and cattails. It is a breeding ground for marsh wrens, song sparrows, red wings and attracts hundreds of osprey, wild ducks, geese, and other birds. The minnows on pools and small streams and the grasshoppers on the mud flats still attract great flocks of migratory waterfowl that alight upon the coastal marshes and river meadows.

In the early days the Native Americans would use their dugout canoes to navigate these “water roads” of the greater Raritan Bay and New York harbor basin. Referred to in the earliest histories of New Jersey here, in Woodbridge, settlers would erect a core of old houses along the maritime quarter – an old New England town cast in an English mold.

\*Scheduled for publication Spring 2021 by American History Press. [www.americanhistorypress.com](http://www.americanhistorypress.com)

“This book sheds light on a fascinating and overlooked period in New Jersey’s past.” Richard Veit, Professor and Chair Department of History and Anthropology, Monmouth University, West long Branch, New Jersey.

**RARITAN MILLSTONE HERITAGE ALLIANCE**

**Membership Contribution**

- Membership Fees**
- Individual \$35
  - Site \$35
  - Household \$50

- Additional Support Levels**
- Benefactor \$1,000
  - Patron \$ 500
  - Sponsor \$ 250
  - Donor \$ 100

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_

State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please return this form with your check**

To: Raritan Millstone Heritage Alliance  
PO Box 5583  
Somerset, NJ 08875-5583

Thank you!

Visit our website: [raritanmillstone.org](http://raritanmillstone.org)

*The Raritan-Millstone Heritage Alliance consists of committed individuals and organizations representing sites within the region of Raritan and Millstone systems. In an area that has continually contributed to the strength of the United States, we seek through our programs to promote, protect and preserve an understanding of our rich historical, cultural and educational heritage as we work to be a model for current and future generations by promoting the rich heritage of our American society.*