

**Appendix 1**

**Wekepeke Land Use 1830 – 2008**

**Produced for Rushing Rivers Institute**

**By**

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## **Land Use History of the Wekepeke Brook Study Area**

This paper will describe the changes in land uses and activities along the Wekepeke Brook in Sterling, Massachusetts from the period beginning in 1830 until the present day. The study area described in this paper begins at the headwaters of the Wekepeke in the area of Heywood Basin and extends to Pratt's Junction and MA Route 12. Information was gathered from records available from the Sterling Historical Society, the Clinton Historical Society, the Sholan Farms History, and interviews with Mrs. Karin Valeri of the Sterling Historical Society and Mr. Jody Murray of Upper North Row Road, Sterling, Massachusetts. The author, who is a local resident and former employee of the farms in the area, has valuable personal knowledge and has contributed greatly to this document.

In 1830, the roads currently known as Upper and Lower North Row Roads extended from Pratt's Junction on the Leominster-Worcester Road (now MA Route 12) to Westminster and onto Barre and towns west. The Wekepeke Brook provided an important source of waterpower to residents of the area at this time and formed three separate millponds south of Lower North Row Road and west of the Worcester Road. Moving upstream and west from Pratt's Junction, each mill provided separate functions within the community beginning with a grist mill owned by G. N. Burpee, a chair and shingle factory owned by E. Burpee, and a sawmill owned by J. Kendall. A store owned by J. Pratt, Jr. was located on the north side of the road.

Traveling west the land use was primarily agriculture owned by different members of the Pratt family and others including the Goodale, Tuttle, Lewis, and Endicott Families on the north side of the road. The town "poor farm" was also located on the north side of the road between the Pratt and Tuttle parcels.

In 1874, a chair factory owned by J. Lynde was located to the south of Lower North Row Road, at what is known as the Lynde Basin. Further west, Wekepeke Brook crosses Upper North Row Road just beyond the junction with Heywood Road. The Wekepeke has its source from two small un-named brooks draining Rocky Hill to the west and Bee Hill to the east in Leominster. In later years, the west source was known as the "Devil's Pulpit" for the water gushing out of several large rock outcroppings slightly up gradient from the base of the hill. The other source captures some drainage from Rocky Hill and additional drainage from the west side Bee Hill. Most of this land was owned by C. Heywood who, in 1837, built a sawmill at the site of the existing dam of Heywood Basin Reservoir. By 1874, this enterprise continued with the construction of a house, additional storage buildings, barn and the development of pasture for farm animals.

Adjacent land to the north, along the Leominster boundary, had been previously acquired by L. M. Hapgood in 1835. By 1870, Hapgood Road continued past the Heywood property and joined Upper North Row Road. Land to the west of Hapgood Road had two other farms, one owned by L. Walker and another by A. Burpee, extended from the base of Rocky Hill to Upper North Row Road. Both were subsistence type farms and examination of the tax records of the time show small homes, sheds, cattle, swine, chickens, etc. as taxable items. Old stone foundations from these homes can still be found along Hapgood Road, if one hunts through the overgrown pastures and forest.

The land along the Wekepeke was beginning to transition slowly from its early owners and away from its manufacturing base as the region approached the turn of the century. The availability of electric power made it possible to locate mills and manufacturing closer to urban centers with better access to roads and rail, and the need for waterpower on small streams was rapidly disappearing. The mills along the Wekepeke were relatively small, cottage-type industries usually attached to lands also suitable for a broad range of agricultural activities. Forests had been cut down to provide timber for the mills and the land was now more suitable for the production of food crops and dairy products as urban areas began to develop and grow in Clinton, Brookline, Worcester, and Boston. Francis Orr kept a small electric-powered sawmill on the south side of Lower North Row Road from 1920 until the late 1960's. His son, Clayton Orr, became a caretaker at the Wekepeke Basin for the Town of Clinton and lived in a house on Heywood Road, once owned by J. Putnam.

In 1880, under the direction of Jonas E. Howe, water superintendent for the Town of Clinton, approximately 200 acres was purchased in Sterling for use as a public water supply for Clinton. The project acquired land from the Lynde, Heywood, Kendall, and Hapgood parcels to build a series of reservoirs that would service the present and future water needs. The reservoirs sit at an elevation much higher than the Town of Clinton making it possible to install a pipe system that was gravity fed. The last dam at the Heywood Basin was constructed around 1926 and was the largest reservoir in the system.

By 1890, the land around the Wekepeke was changing dramatically as more intensive agricultural use was developed. The dairy and orchard production along Lower North Row Road grew substantially on farms owned by Homer Beauchene, E. Kendall Haywood, and others. On Upper North Row Road the Hapgood, Willard, Burpee, and Heywood families were also herding dairy cattle for the production of milk, cheese, and butter, however these parcels were eventually purchased by Town of Clinton to become part of the water supply system.

In 1910, at the junction of North Row and Heywood Roads, the Heywood orchard property was purchased by Chester Blodgett and he planted over 1,000 trees (mostly Baldwins and McIntosh). By 1912, pesticide applications intensified as San Jose scale and other insect populations began to thrive in the orchard monocultures, moving from parcel to adjacent parcels.

In 1912, just over the town line in Leominster, Paul Washburn bought the 90-acre Rogers Farm from D. E. Wheeler and two other parcels of 58 and 48 acres to establish the Sholan Farms on the west and east slopes of Bee Hill. This was used as a dairy farm until the 1920's but was converted to vegetable and orchard production shortly thereafter. Vegetables were grown between the rows of fruit trees until they matured to produce fruit. This parcel grew to become the second largest orchard in Massachusetts and a substantial portion of its land area drains directly into the Heywood Basin. Upon the death of Mr. Washburn, the farm went through multiple ownerships until it was sold to the Possick family in the early 1990's. It was purchased in 2001 by the City of Leominster and continues to operate as an orchard and farm today.

From 1930 until 1950, parcels were sold along Upper North Row Road, and for the most part, remained in some level of agricultural use. As you cross the Wekepeke, on the north side, the

Cunningham family had dairy cows and operated a local slaughterhouse. Moving west the Ballard family raised chickens, and on the south side, Ephraim Murray had purchased land from Luther Hapgood to grow vegetable crops and eventually maintain a dairy herd.

In 1950, Myrton Baithrow opened a gravel pit on the south side of Upper North Row Road almost adjacent to the Wekepeke, and he continued to extract material until the early 1970's. Residential home construction began to expand into the area in the 1980's, particularly in the form of "hobby farms" which kept a few acres for horses to graze. A new barn was constructed by B. Caisse in the area of the spent gravel pit, and he bred and raised many champion Morgan horses. The old Blodgett homestead was sold to the Clements and subsequently Ferguson families and they kept stables of horses. On the north side of the road, horses were kept by the Robinson family.

Today substantial residential development exists on both sides of Lower North Row Road as construction of large three and four bedroom homes has taken place. There are still several open rolling fields that are part of the old early parcels but they are under continual transient ownership, and prime for rapid residential development.

If one were to examine threats to the Wekepeke waters over time it would probably begin at the early mills, when glues and other adhesive materials used to fasten chairs may have been toxic compounds. Adverse effects from agriculture are well known and range from the runoff of animal manures, siltation from exposed soil, to the toxic chemicals used for controlling insects in any form of intensive agriculture. This may still be an issue on the lands that have been or are currently in use for orchard crops, since they have had the most frequent and intense application of pesticides. Formulations applied on these orchard parcels have included chlorinated hydrocarbons, carbamates, organophosphates, and strong fungicides.

Not to be discounted or ignored are the earlier mentioned threats of expanded residential development. From this come an increase in pesticides from lawn fertilizer with its nitrogen and phosphorous loading, increased runoff of hydrocarbons and thermal loading from paved areas, and the potential for pollution from failed septic systems. While this type of development has not arrived en masse at Upper North Row Road yet, it is now a prime area for this type of land use.

There have been many changes to this area of the Wekepeke Brook Watershed since 1830, and each change may have had significant effects on the residents of both North Row Roads. If one were to look at the entire timeline of land use, most of the change has been in the form of ownership. For the most part the land has gone from forest, to mill, to field, and now back to forest on many parcels. This, most likely, will not continue because parcels held in ownership for "the love of the land" by elders are shifting toward younger generations who will need capital to provide for their own financial well-being and security. The likelihood that younger owners will devise ways to live off the land is not realistic and the new owners are probably better equipped to manage money and assets in investment accounts, than to milk a cow or throw hay bales.

Needless to say, it will be necessary to consider appropriate planning and zoning tools to protect the waters of the Wekepeke in the years to come.

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