



Friends of the Suncook River River Currents

Volume 4

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The Day the Suncook River Flowed Upstream; During The Great Mother's Day Flood of 2006!

(Submitted by Eric Orff)

Goals:

- Identify and facilitate protection of natural resources, important cultural and historical areas.
- Identify lands to form greenways within the watershed and to join protected lands with adjacent greenways.
- Educate the public about the watershed.
- Educate landowners, public officials and citizens in the importance of protecting open space lands.

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*The Great Mother's Day
Commemorative Calendar
which runs
May '07 to May '08
is still available
free with membership!*

For much of the night and well into the day of Tuesday May 16, 2006 the Suncook River actually flowed upstream from the Old Mill Dam in Epsom during the highest flood in 100 years on the river. In fact, the river flowed north, in the opposite direction it had flowed since the Ice Age. Indeed, a half mile section of the Suncook River, immediately upstream of the Old Mill dam, drained during the great Mother's Day flood of 2006.

A half mile upstream, a breach in the river's historic banking was pulling the river into an entirely new channel, and literally would suck the old riverbed dry in less than 12 hours. Not only did the new channel suck dry the riverbed above the two dams situated at the head of a series of falls that coursed either side of Bear Island, but it turned two mile-long stretches of roiling flood waters on either side of the island to dry riverbeds as well. In less than a day, two and a half miles of the Suncook River simply disappeared!

Local dam historian Al Bickford of Epsom, pegs the construction of the pair of dams, still in place at the island's north end, at between 1870 and 1872. The NH Department of Environmental Services Dam Bureau names this dam, the Huckins Mill Dam. Their records show it was reconstructed in 1937 for a saw mill.

This dam has 202 square miles of drainage area with an impounded surface area of 5 acres. The western section, closest to the old mill, is 98 feet wide with a maximum height of 13 feet. Most recently, in the 1980's, the dam was converted to a hydro power unit for a short period. Then the mill site was converted into the Old Mill Restaurant, and is currently occupied by the Concord Elks Club.

But let's back up to see how quickly the complexion of the Suncook River changed from a meandering river in Epsom, save for the two sections of the river that bracketed Bear Island. Instead of meandering, this section of the river tumbled down a series of rapids and falls for most of the length of the mile-long island before rejoining as one at the confluence of the island's tail. This created the best section of river for trout fishing in Epsom.

The river sweeps past my house about three miles downstream. For the first time in the twenty-six years I have lived overlooking the river, it didn't completely freeze last winter, at least by my house. The snow-less winter and dry spring conditions, that just over a week prior had the sign next to the Epsom Fire Department declaring "No Burning Permits Issued", also practically put the river into a summer slumber stage.

All that changed with a deluge of rain starting most of the day Saturday. By evening my rain gauge measured 3 ½ inches. Our sleeping neighbor was stirring by nightfall. By Sunday morning, the Flood Warning predictions that seemed so senseless two days before, were looking more ominous by the hour. The river was rising rapidly. In fact, I spent much of Mother's Day helping the neighbor downriver from me sandbag the flood wall he built in 1988 to protect the lower level of his home which sets right at river's edge. We hurriedly added a layer of sand bags on top of his three foot high wall.



(photo by E. Orff)

This was the scene along the river in Epsom in May '06. Some of the same folks who suffered damage in the Great Mother's Day Flood of '06 were hit even harder in the April '07 floods.

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