



NORWICH
Historical Society
and Community Center

HISTORIC DRIVING TOUR

— NORWICH RIVERS & MILLS —

A Companion to the Norwich Historic Audio Tours

Podcast Tour Transcript

Rivers and Mills

Welcome to our Mills and River Podcast Tour. My name is Sarah Rooker and I'm the Director of the Norwich Historical Society. I hope you're ready to learn about all Norwich's brooks, rivers, and the power of water.

It all began when

Continents collided, mountains tilted up and

Mile-thick glaciers carved through the earth

You see

Millions of years of water contoured this place we call home.

My name is Nelson Rooker and I'll be giving you directions to each stop.

My name is Calli Guion I love learning about history and I'm going to be your guide on this journey into the rivers and mills of Norwich, Vermont.

We all know the Connecticut River! It has flowed in its current location for about two million years. Did you know that? Are you curious about how it came to be?

600 million years ago, way before the time of the dinosaurs, a continental collision left great faults that created paths for water and channels that became the rivers and streams we see today in Norwich.

Around 23,000 years ago, glaciers covered New England. In some places these large masses of ice and compacted snow were one and a half miles thick. From Norwich to the Hanover COOP is about a half a mile!

Imagine how high a mile and a half of ice would be! That's taller than Mount Washington!

As the glaciers melted, waters flowed down what is now the Connecticut River Valley and flooded behind a dam of debris and ice in what is now Connecticut.

These flooded waters formed a long, long lake, known as Lake Hitchcock. It stretched at least 250 miles north, beyond St. Johnsbury, Vermont.

You can see remains of Lake Hitchcock in Norwich where the Marion Cross School playground is today. The playground marks the flat bottom of the lake.

Next time you are on the Norwich Green, pretend you're at the bottom of a giant lake!

Our first stop is Blood Brook.

Turn left out of the driveway and left onto Elm Street.

Cross the bridge and stop on the side of the road where it's safe.

You might want to listen to the next stop while standing on the bridge.

Stop 1: The Mills at Blood Brook

Take a look at this waterfall. Is the water rushing and roaring over the falls? Have you ever heard of the power of water? Our earliest Norwich settlers certainly did and they built mills with water wheels to harness that power. If you look carefully, you may see remnants of the saw mill that was below this bridge

First they built dams in the brook above the falls. The dams held the water back in what were called "mill ponds". The water from the mill ponds flowed rapidly through chutes under the mills, turning the waterwheels.

At the sawmill, the power of the water wheel turned gears allowing the saw blade to cut the logs faster than any two men could have. Waterpower made the work faster and more efficient at mills throughout the town of Norwich

Mills throughout Norwich were powered by water .

There were gristmills for grinding grain and sawmills that sawed logs into wood that could be used for building houses. After the Civil War, the mill produced wooden pails from the lumber. There were also several tanneries that tanned leather and a fulling mill that pounded the woolen cloth to tighten the weave.

If you had walked down the road to Blood Brook in the years following the Civil War, besides the roar of the water, you would have heard the rumbling of the waterwheels, the grinding and clanking of various machines and the shouts and chatter of the workers who kept them all running.

Unfortunately, you would also have smelled the tannery where animal hides were being processed into leather.

Our next stop is near the Ompompanoosuc River at Campbell Flats Road. Go back to Main Street and turn left. Travel 5 miles. Turn right onto Route 132 east. Cross the Ompompanoosuc River and stop across from Campbell Flats Road.

Stop 2: Pattersonville

In 1872 Leslie Spencer Patterson purchased an old mill that stood on the bank of the Ompompanoosuc River and turned it into a chair factory.

It was a good spot. There was a steady flow of water, reliable transportation thanks to the railroad, and a ready supply of logs drawn to the factory from the log drives on the Connecticut River. You'll learn about the log drives soon!

If you look downstream from the bridge on the right you can just make out the remains of the dam which created the millpond from which flowed the water that powered the factory's water wheels and turbines. Every year the mill produced and shipped 10 train cars loaded with chairs along with about 800,000 feet of lumber.

That's 150 miles of lumber --if it were laid end-to-end, it would reach from Norwich to Boston!

A small company town grew up around the chair factory. There were eight buildings to house the workers. Among them was Chester Tucker, who in 1910 came to work at the tender age of 14. He might well have had the job of driving the wagonloads of chairs down to the train station.

That yellow house on your left belonged to mill-owner Leslie Spencer Patterson.

Just to the right of the yellow house there once stood a general store, the second floor of which sometimes served as a dance hall--just like at Dan & Whit's! Eventually the community became known as Pattersonville.

Continue down Route 132. Turn right onto Route 5 South and almost immediately thereafter, turn right onto Old Bridge Road. Turn around and look across Route 5 and down Kendall Station Road.

Please do not drive onto Kendall Station Road. There is no outlet and we want to discourage people from using the driveways to turn their cars around, plus the railroad crossing has no safety gates! You are welcome to walk cross and get a closer look at Kendall Station, if you'd like.

Stop 3: The River as a Transportation Artery

For the Abenaki, the Connecticut River was one of the most important traveling routes to the Upper Valley.

Early Norwich settlers used it as well. They traveled to their new homes by canoes and rafts in the spring and summer and by sleds and sleighs in the winter. Settlers visited friends, traded with neighbors, and visited family back home. There was also a rough path on the New Hampshire side of the river.

Running alongside the Connecticut River are three more transportation networks: the railroad, Route 5, and Interstate 91.

In 1848 the Connecticut & Passumpsic Rivers Railroad laid track between White River Junction and Bradford, stopping at the Norwich station in Lewiston.

Later, the Elizabeth Copper Mine in Strafford built the railroad station on Kendall Station Road on the far side of the tracks. You might have noticed it at the last stop.

If you had been standing at that station, you would have seen cartloads of chairs from Pattersonville or large teams of draft animals hauling copper from the mine to be shipped on the railroad.

Railroad stations were really important to early Norwich residents, for transportation and communication. Notice the remains of telegraph poles, the poles with cross arms running along the east side of the tracks.

Telegraph service was introduced during the Civil War. It was the first time people could communicate quickly with family far away.

When automobiles were invented, and came to the Upper Valley in the early 1900s, Route 5 was improved and then eventually paved.

Fun fact!

In 1922 the New England states created a numbering system for their highways-four years before the federal government developed its own system.

The federal system used odd numbers for north-south routes and even numbers for east-west routes—the opposite of the New England system. The New England routes that did not become federal highways retain their old numbers. So, across the river, state highway Route 10 runs north/south. You are driving on Route 5, a federal highway also running north/south. Even/Odd; NH/VT—there's always something marking the difference!

Construction of Interstate 91 began in the 1960s following the path of earlier travelers and opening the way for high-speed travel.

Our next stop is at the old Lewiston Train station built in 1884..

As you drive down Route 5, notice at two miles, the small pumping station building on the right. Norwich's drinking water comes from a 170-foot-deep well that produces 250 gallons a minute. You'll hear more about this later.

If you listened to the Early Settlement podcast, you'll remember that a rope ferry operated at the foot of Loveland Road. A sturdy rope stretched across the river helping the ferry master navigate a straight course.

Follow Route 5, bear left onto River Road and stop just before the lights. Turn right into the parking lot and park near the railroad station building which is next to the tracks.

Stop 4: The Log Drives and the Hamlet of Lewiston

If you can take the podcast with you, walk over to the river.

Imagine looking out onto the river and seeing it filled bank to bank with logs.

After the Civil War, millions of long logs from the Vermont and New Hampshire forests floated down the Connecticut River.

In the Northern Forest, hundreds of men cut hardwood in the winter, and hauled the logs to nearby streams.

They built dams on the streams to hold back the water and logs, until they were ready, and then loosed the water to flush the timber downstream.

It was very dangerous work and the men had to wear spiked boots and be able to ride logs in fast, icy water up to 16 hours a day.

It was said that the women who kissed their men good-bye in the spring never knew whether they'd see them alive again.

Walk back to where you parked and take a look at the train station.

This part of Norwich was named for the Lewis family who arrived in 1767. Dr. Lewis was the first doctor in Norwich.

Lewiston has always been a center of transportation with ferries, bridges, and trains.

There was a post office and mail arrived by train twice a day.

Dartmouth students arrived by train and then rode a stage coach across the covered bridge and up the hill to Hanover.

Families took the train to White River Junction and back to shop, and on Saturdays took the “peanut train” down to the picture shows.

In 1902 you could take 5 trains a day going north and 4 south from Lewiston.

The very tall building you see was once the Thompson Grist Mill. Inside are massive wooden beams, said to have been part of an early bridge over the Connecticut River.

Other buildings in Lewiston included a general store, shoe shop, and many homes on both sides of the road leading up the hill.

By 1959, the Lewiston Railroad Station had closed and the interstate was on its way.

In April 1967 five homes and several other buildings were demolished to widen the road and connect it to the interchange.

Drive across Ledyard Bridge into Hanover, turn left into the parking lot and look back over the river to Lewiston.

Stop 5: Managing Water

Before dams were built, spring thaws and heavy storms routinely caused tremendous flooding and destruction downstream.

The Union Village Dam was one of 16 reservoirs and dams built to control water flow into the Connecticut.

When the Wilder Dam was built in 1950, it raised the level of the Connecticut River by 16 feet, wiping out much of the shoreline.

The river, where you are now, is much wider and slower moving than it used to be.

Remember the pumping station you saw?

Much of Norwich’s drinking water comes from a 170-foot-deep well drilled deep into the aquifer that runs from north of St. Johnsbury, VT, to Connecticut, approximately the same stretch as ancient Lake Hitchcock.

Today on average, Norwich uses 65,000 gallons of water a day, but the aquifer has the capacity to provide a million gallons in a day. That doesn’t mean you should waste water!

Look up to the hills. Water is pumped through pipes 5 miles up to a holding tank on Dutton Hill. The tank is 100 feet long, 50 feet wide, and 12 feet deep and can hold 500,000 gallons. That water is then pumped down to many households in Norwich village.

In the early days before electricity, food was kept fresh using ice harvested from ponds, rivers, and lakes. Blocks of ice were stacked and packed in salted hay and sawdust, and stored in icehouses.

Some of the ice came from the Connecticut River near Lewiston. In the early 1900s the Lewis family stored it in their barn and peddled it door to door throughout the summer.

As the river grew increasingly polluted, they stopped harvesting ice.

By the 1950s the Connecticut River had earned a reputation as “New England’s best landscaped sewer.”

Waste from the copper mines upriver, raw sewage from homes and factories, runoff from farmland, and pollutants such as the insecticide DDT all found their way into the Connecticut River.

Adding insult to injury, the river was used as a dumping ground for household trash. People still remember seeing sinks, refrigerators, tires, and other assorted trash littering the riverbanks.

These pollutants and the dams along the river disrupted the natural habitats of fish, and some, like the migratory Atlantic salmon disappeared altogether.

The Connecticut River Watershed Council, was founded in 1952 to confront the river’s immense pollution problem. In 1972, the Clean Water Act was passed by Congress.

Wastewater treatment systems, modern household septic systems, and new standards in farmland and manure management have all helped improve water quality although much work remains to be done.

We must all continue to do our part to keep the rivers clean! Take a moment to think of what the Connecticut River means to you and your family

We hope you enjoyed your tour. You can find photographs and more stories of Norwich’s rivers and mills at the Norwich Historical Society website, as well as links to more podcast driving tours and walking tours.

