

The Rancocas Creek Maritime Cultural Survey Final Report

Stephen Nagiewicz, Adjunct Professor, Stockton University

Student Researchers: Elizabeth Klein, Christina Price, Jessica Baroni, Nick Lang, Cassidy Vincent, Rachelle Falls and Travis Nagiewicz Special thanks to Sonar Expert and friend, Vince Capone for technical help.



Figure 1 Rancocas Creek. Areas of interest – Marine History

Introduction

Rancocas Creek can trace its history back to early Dutch Explorers who provided one of the first charts of the area in 1620. We now know that nomadic Indian Tribes like the Lenape have left traces of their presence back as far as 100,000 years ago just after the melting of the Wisconsin Glaciation covering most of North America at that time. The sediment run-off



Figure 2. Small animal tracks along the creek are common to find.

from the glaciers melting made the alluvial plains of New Jersey. Rancocas Creek flows into the Delaware River not too far upstream from Philadelphia, making it an important transport of food, goods and people. Many of the first towns in New Jersey are located along its main stem and Northern and Southern Branches. The headwater travel down from western Ocean County and

many of the small tributaries meet in confluences like the forks and the Mullica River deep in the Pinelands.

Commerce traces its influence on the area from the Revolutionary War to the present. As Civilization spread out along its banks, many changes occurred to the creek proper and along its branches. The most important was the construction of the State of New Jersey Turnpike bridges. These bridges effectively cut-off large boat traffic up and down the creek and by unintended consequences cut-off the Northern and Southern Branches from heavy boat traffic. This had the effect of preserving the natural areas along the creeks. While many towns and roads still brought in people and commerce, the creek was left to small vessels, no longer a major commerce supplier to the Delaware River. This barrier enables researchers and scientists to explore a natural area along the creeks relatively untouched by civilization, in many cases preserving maritime history and certainly enabling many animal and avian species to flourish.



Figure 3 Wildlife along Rancocas Creek

This maritime history project will research the submerged history along key parts of the creek accepted archaeological procedure and practice. This project also serves a field classroom for students enrolled in Underwater Archaeology a Spring semester course at Stockton University.



Figure 4 Stockton River Survey vessel RV Zosteria with sonar expert Vince Capone and author utilizing a Humminbird MGA 12kHz side scan sonar

Timeline

October 2016

This project started in October of 2016 when John Anderson of Rancocas Pathways, Inc. (501.C3) contacted James Delgado of NOAA in an email asking for help in discovering the documenting the maritime time heritage of the Rancocas Creek, Delgado at that time was the Director of the Office of Maritime Heritage, part of the National Marine Sanctuaries, and a part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. (NOAA)

Mr. Anderson needed help in documenting historical evidence and history in order to complete an application with the National Parks Water Trail designation. To date only 21 rivers has such a designation. A few days later, James Delgado, who I had worked with on the Robert J Walker Historic Shipwreck off Atlantic City in 2015, emailed me and also his friends at East Carolina University in North Carolina if one of us would be interested in helping. I accepted his request.

Late October 2016 I met a few times with Mr. Anderson, visiting locations along the creek that had historic/maritime cultural heritage because this is all part of becoming a National Water Trail, we paddled much of the Creeks North Branch to view the area from the water. My take-away. The aquatic and forested environment along the creek is out of place with the surrounding



Figure 5 Profuse avian species are common sights.

civilization and development of all the communities who border the creek. Overhead flew Bald Eagles, Red tail Hawks, Turkey Vultures, Canadian Geese, Mallards and so many birds. To my surprise beaver dams were built all along the creek. I never expected to still find beaver in NJ! With the beaver were otters, snapping turtles, spawning bass and a couple dozen riverine marine

life species. All admittedly vanish quickly when you paddle by but on every paddle they are present.

November – December 2016

I started to plan with John and his members a list of priorities for documentation and which would be of historic interest. I knew that in the Spring I'd be teaching an Underwater Archaeology course at Stockton University, so we planned how to use the creek as a field work lab for the students. This was optional work on their part as it would require using their weekend days to work.

We selected three locations for a mapping/documentation exercise. Timbuctoo Area, Melpine Landing, Suspected Phosphorus Mining location and the Oxbow (turn-around) in Mount Holly.

Timbuctoo, and area in Westampton Township, has its historical roots before the Civil War as a suspected stop along the Underground Railroads for runaway slaves seeking freedom. Although I believe that this was more than a 'stop'. I think it was a place where runaway slaves could stay in without fear. Evidence is in all the families who settled here and whose ancestors are still there. A railroad stop might not include a cemetery for Black Civil War Soldiers. Evidence my students un-earthed where of two sites both likely old Clay works along Grubbs Run a smallish feeder stream that runs into the Rancocas.

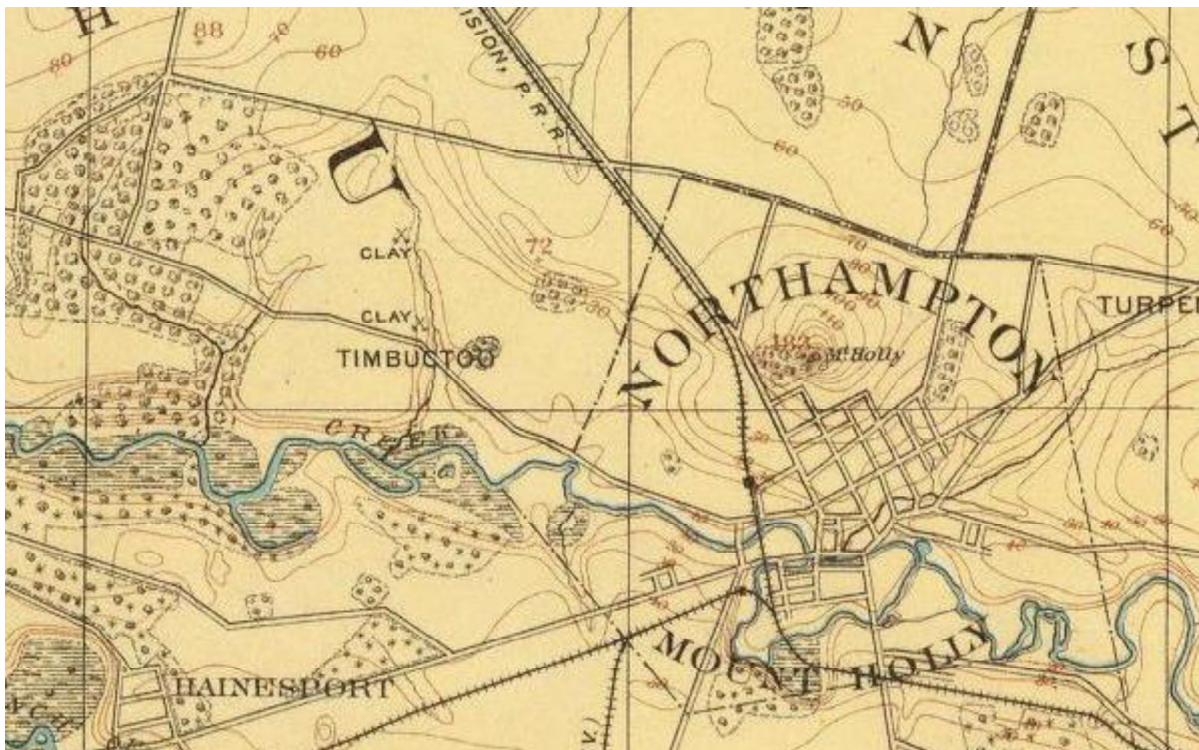


Figure 6 Late 19th Century map of Northampton-Timbuctoo area.

It is wide enough that during high tides it was possible for flat bottom barges to traverse the creek bring clay, brick, sand, phosphorus and several other products of the Pine Barrens during



Figure 7 Remnants of red and gray clay brick at Grubbs Run creek just off the Northern Branch of the Rancocas Creek.

the 18th and 19th centuries. Since this stream ran through Timbuctoo, it is logical to assume that the residents of the area worked the clay & brick works, even putting down roots in the area.

April 2017

The students on the expedition to survey/map the Grubbs Run portion of Timbuctoo in Northampton Township were Rachelle Falls, a senior from Williamstown, N.J. who is majoring



Figure 8 Stockton Underwater Archaeology Students along Grubbs Run creek bed.

in Marine Science, Jessica Baroni, a sophomore Marine Biology major from Haworth, N.J., Nick Lang, a junior majoring in Marine Science from Bergenfield, N.J., Christina Price, a senior Marine Science major from Haddon Township, N.J., and Cassidy Vincent, a freshman from

Ashville, Pa. who hasn't decided on a major yet. The township passed a special ordinance allowing students access on township land to do their archaeology survey work.

They mapped and survey the banks of Grubbs Run. Here we found evidence, wooden pilings possibly part of two old docks or piers, perhaps loading docks for the clay and brick to ship downstream. We also found several bricks buried in the stream some with markings along with pieces of concrete the content of which was indicative of the ear. Each site was carefully recorded and imaged and geo-referenced. Both sites matched old maps of the area from the late 1800's.



Figure 9. Stockton students taking measurements of the site.

The mapping experience was over two days and was meant to provide a real-life lab experience for students to practice class discussed procedures and practice in archaeological training. To extensively catalog and map this site will require more sampling at some future date. Preliminary results were encouraging in our being able to uncover evidence artifacts linked directly to hand struck brick manufacture of the period despite all the new housing developments in the Westampton-Mt. Holly area which covered over or destroyed areas around these sites. In figure xx above the students are working on the second clay site noted in figure 6. The images below are at the site approximated in Figure 2 nearest the creek. Our conclusion is that there is evidence to preliminarily state this was part of those clay mining/manufacture sites from late 1870's-1880's. Obviously more work needs to be done to survey and catalog this important historical area which would require permits from the Town of Westampton and the State DEP.



Figure 10 Four images of the dig site at Timbuctoo. Indicating potential evidence of clay and brick mining and features associated with pilings and dock or piers. Images from top left to bottom right: wood support pile, meter stick describing height of creek bank cut by currents and evidence of clay throughout, early concrete support (high rock particle content) and grey brick of apparent hand-struck formation. All items left in-situ on-site. The area today sits between housing developments.

The Second Site is called Melpine Landing further west of Timbuctoo and still on the Northern Branch of the Rancocas. Rancocas Pathways, Inc. plan to develop this site for public use over the next few years. This area is quite close to main roads and provides kayakers and canoer's easy entry to the creek. The objective of Rancocas Pathways is to designate the creek as a National Water Trail and provide use and access for recreational activities, promoting local commerce all the while preserving its history and natural environment.



Figure 11 Melpine Landing



Figure 12 Kayaking the Rancocas Creek



Figure 13 Kayak and creek safety lecture

Indian artifacts have been found in and around the site as have old bottles which may have been part of an old dump site for the town of Westampton and others during the past two centuries. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence to support the theory ancient indian tribe, likely the Lenape Indians. Artifacts have been dated to 500 BC to as recent as 1500 AD from various locations throughout the area. Tribes were nomadic, always looking for campsites with available food and water.

This rich history is what makes a place like Melpine Landing unique for visitors as well as researchers. Stockton's Maritime survey found evidence of creek maritime use along this area. The Creek has long been utilized for transport as well as natural resources.



Figure 14 Shaped rocks or tools of ancient indian tribes. Rock were found by John Anderson from muddy sediment along Melpine Landing.



Figure 15 Example of bottle recovered at low tide by Rancocas Pathways at Melpine Landing.



Figure 16 Existing bulkheading and dock structure designated for maritime use of some type.

Stockton performed three underwater sonar surveys of the creek using Humminbird MEGA side sonar. This affordable sonar is designed for recreational fishermen to chart their favorite fishing locations. Stockton has adapted it for shallow water sonar surveys of maritime history. It uses 1200 kilohertz sound frequency to image underwater objects, marine life or underwater habitat. The 1200kHz delivers very crisp imagery in water from 1-2 feet to 200 feet.

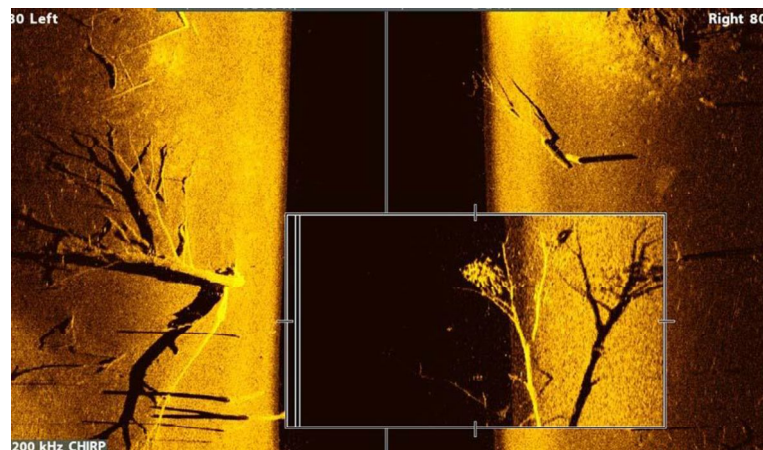


Figure 17 Humminbird produces clear images of bottom features, shipwrecks, habitat. Rancocas Creek is often choked with submerged trees like these making it challenge for boat traffic.

The objective was sonar mapping for evidence of old piers, bulkheading, docks, boat ramps or potential shipwrecks and late 19th Century Mill sites along the creek and confirming the stories

and history recorded by people who lived and worked the creek. Our initial targets were: Timbuctoo/Grubbs Run, Phosphorus mining/shipping sites and Melpine Landing.

Phosphorus Mining Sites

The third target site is an old Phosphorus factory along the Southern Branch of the Rancocas Creek on either side of the Turnpike Bridges. Evidence of piers, pilings and phosphorus retorts can be found at low tides. Stockton just completed a preliminary side scan sonar of the area documenting the underwater structure, still visible on sonar.

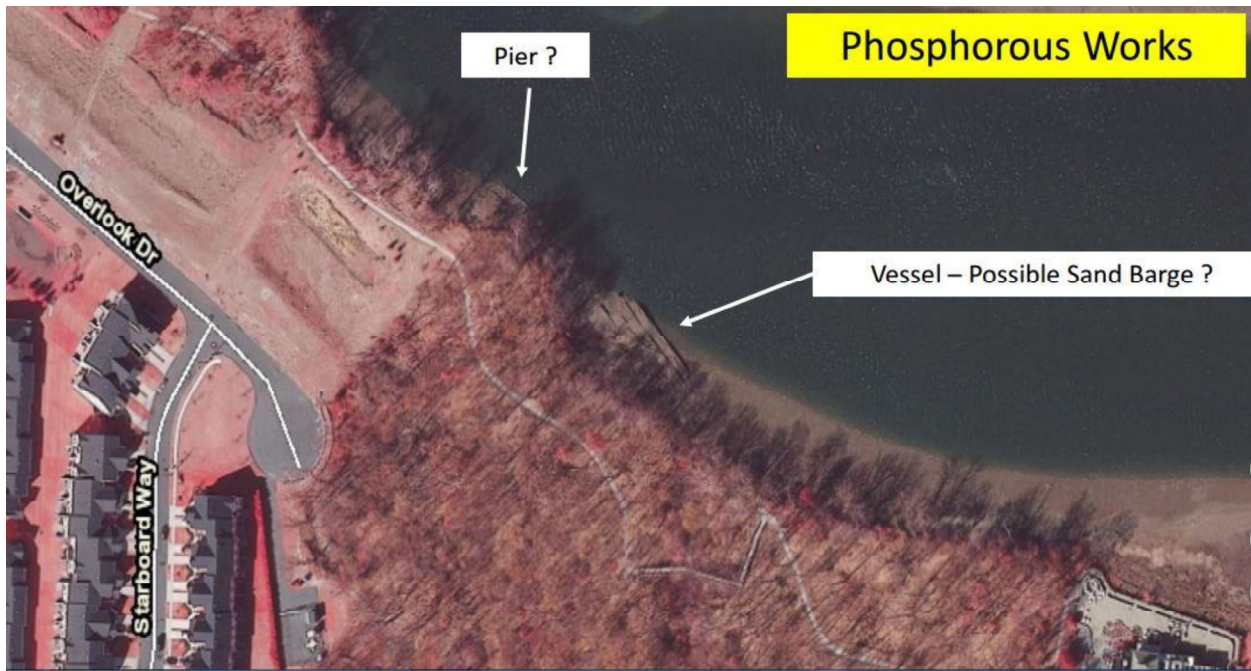


Figure 18 Site of late 19th Century Phosphorus Plant.



Figure 19 Skeletal remains of Bulkhead and loading dock protruding from creek at low water.

One site produced actual crucibles or phosphorus Retorts, almost all in various stages of decay but one was recovered fully intact, very likely preserved by the muddy sediment in the creek until current and tidal forces uncovered it at a dead low tide.



Figure 20 Skeletal remain of old wood barge.

There is a possibility the remains of old barge or perhaps floating dock in figure 21 below that is partially buried in the river sediment at the spot. Our survey uncovered many examples of underwater structure of past bulkheading, docks, piers and pilings. What we needed to find was confirmation of phosphorus at these suspected sites. We needed to find Retorts, the vessels used to carry and transport the mined phosphorus. Historical research indicated that phosphorus was a very important business in the late 1800's.



Figure 21 Retort location

One of the indicators we monitored was the higher than normal phosphorus content in creek water, while not out of the ordinary along a river, it was another indicator. Just as grey and red clays indicate old clay works. These were common products shipped down the creek to the Delaware River and to markets based out of Philadelphia.

A retort is a glass, porcelain or ceramic vessel used in the manufacture of phosphorous.



Figure 22 Retort from figure 21 scaled.



Figure 23 A fully intact Retort. One of the very few found in such condition.

Phosphorus had many important uses in the late 19th Century. It was a good component for fertilizer, as illustrated in the Figure xx below as well as for some medicinal uses, although many



of these were speculative and dangerous that Phosphorus could harm easily and of course it is a common part of making matchheads as it burned brightly. Nevertheless, it was a growing business along parts of the Rancocas.



Figure 24 One of many sites of shipping, docks and commerce along the creek.



Figure 25 Remains of barge and loading dock alongside the creek for phosphorus works.

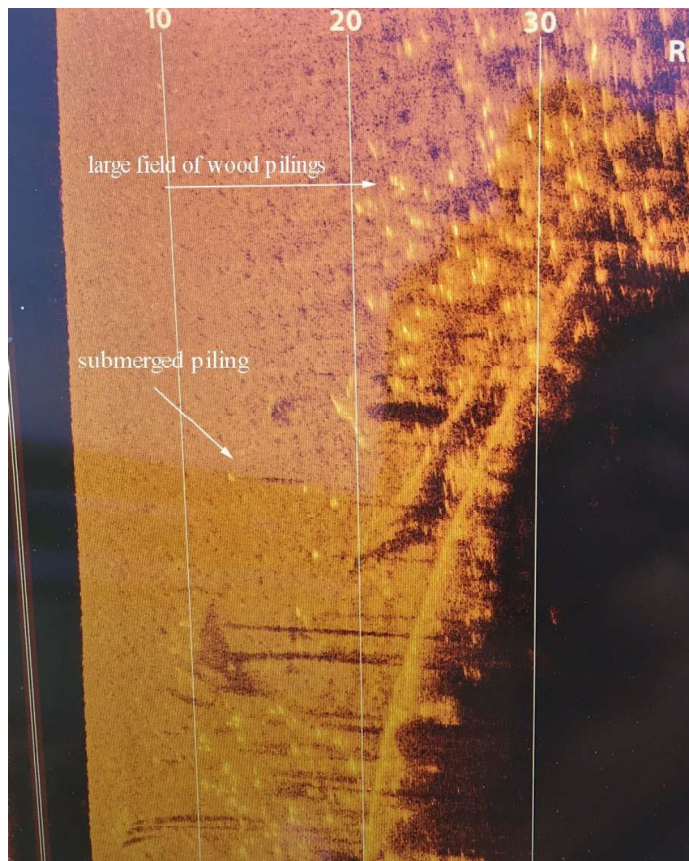


Figure 26 Sonar image of phosphorus plant bulkheading and piers or docks.

Understanding the image from side scan sonar, the diagram in figure 27 is good illustration of the principle behind sonar pulses. In this case, the sonar pings off a target like a wood piling and creates a bright sonar reflection. Since the sonar pulses cannot travel through the target it leaves a black or dark shadow behind the bright speck, which can also be measured telling the operator the apparent height of the target. This allows us to ‘see’ underwater and map structure unseen even at low tides.

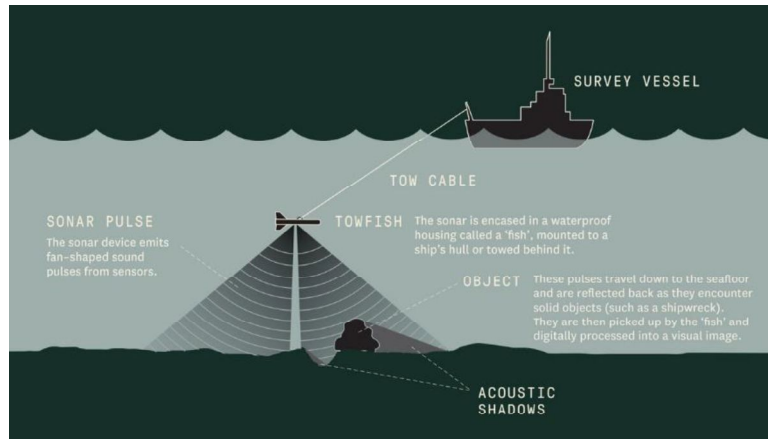


Figure 27 The illustration shows how an object on the bottom can create a shadow as they get reflected to the sensor. Note the difference in acoustic shadow of an object on the surface of the sea floor and a depression or crater in the seafloor.

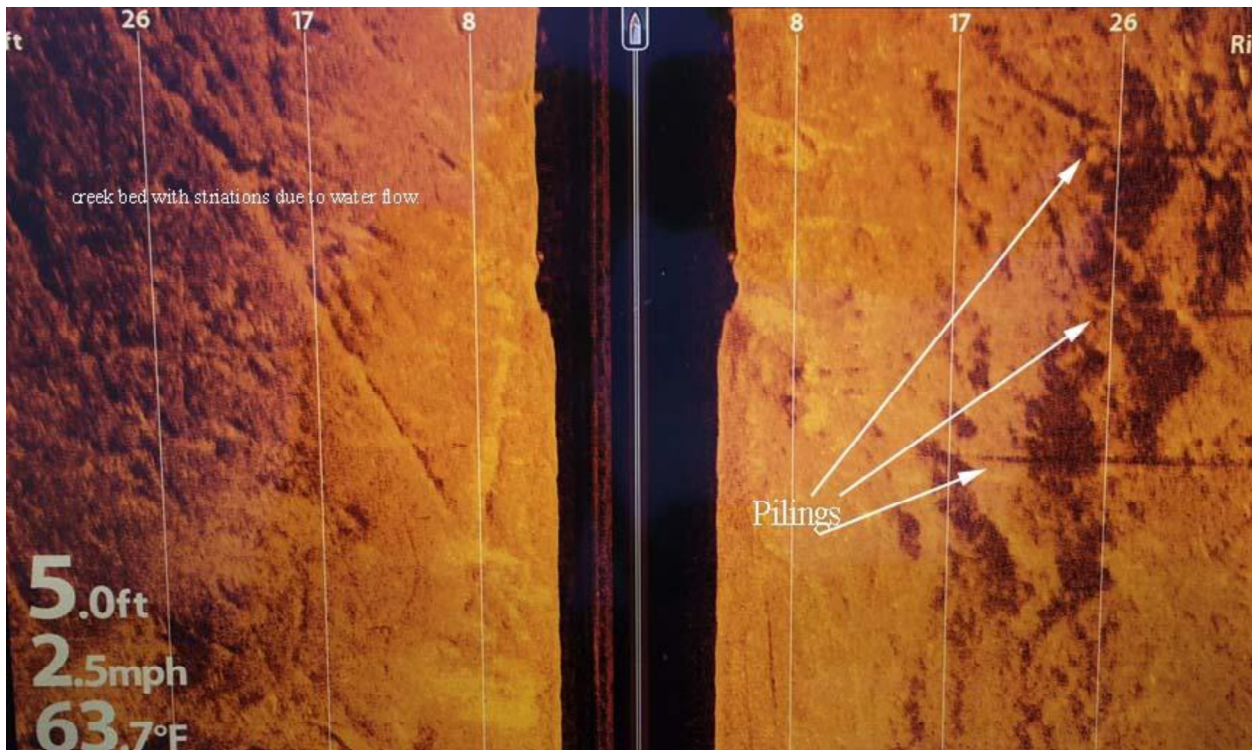


Figure 28. Sonar image taken near site of Rowan Estate. Probably the bulkheading for their boat docks.

May – June 2017

Plans include more side scan sonar data collection and meetings with organization and historical societies for research. Some additional time in the field at Timbuctoo.

July-August 2017

Community presentations towards goal of successfully completing the nomination of the Creek to the NJ State Park Blue Trail and National Parks Water Trail System.

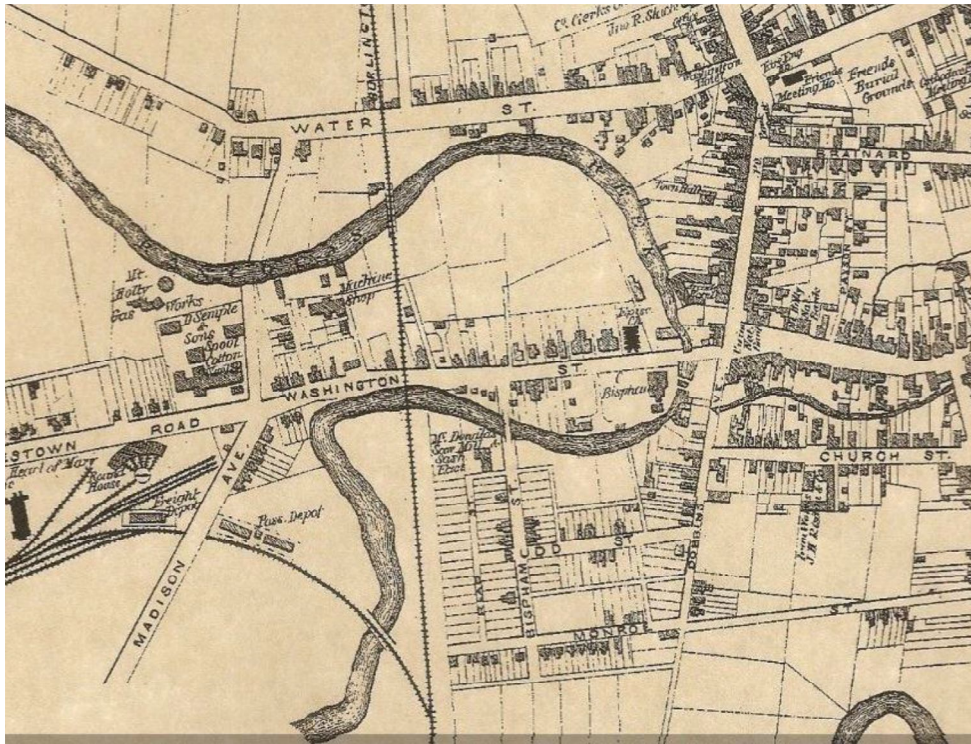


Figure 29 Map of Mt. Holly (1876) showing Rancocas Creek as potential oxbow.



Figure 30. Portion of the Rancocas Creek near oxbow.

History

There is evidence that the first explorers to map the Delaware and Rancocas Creek were the Dutch. Map dated to 1616 show a drawing of the Delaware River along the Pennsylvania coast and New Jersey coast and all the small creeks and tributaries including the Rancocas. The drawing includes the creek proper up to the confluence of its North and South Branches.

Many of the towns along the Rancocas and Delaware were among the first incorporated. What is now Mount Holly was originally formed as Northampton on November 6, 1688. Northampton was incorporated as one of New Jersey's first 104 townships by an act of the New Jersey Legislature on February 21, 1798. There are numerous buildings and place on the National Register of Historic Places along the Creek

The Rancocas Creek Physical Data

Rancocas Creek is a tributary of the Delaware River in southwestern New Jersey. The creek's main stem is 8.3 miles (13.4 km) long, with a North Branch of 28.3 miles (45.5 km) and a South Branch flowing 21.7 miles (34.9 km). The creek system drains a rural agricultural and forested area on the western edge of the Pinelands north and northeast of Camden and the New Jersey suburbs of Philadelphia. The North Branch Rancocas Creek is a 31-mile-long (50 km) tributary of Rancocas Creek in southwestern New Jersey. From its confluence with Rancocas Creek, tidewater extends upstream to the upper end of Mount Holly.

The North Branch Rancocas Creek drains an area of 167 square miles. ^[3]The creek is among the more developed portions of the Rancocas Creek watershed.

The South Branch Rancocas Creek is a 21.7-mile-long (34.9 km) tributary of Rancocas Creek in Burlington County, New Jersey in the United States. The South Branch Rancocas Creek drains an area of 144 square miles. Much of the upland agriculture within the Rancocas Creek basin lies inside the South Branch Rancocas Creek basin. It is also among the least developed parts of the Rancocas Creek watershed.

It is navigable for approximately 10 miles (16 km) upstream from its mouth on the Delaware. However, the CR 635 Bridge effectively places a barrier to boat traffic 7.6 miles (12.2 km) upstream from the Delaware. It is this barrier that I we think has preserved the uniqueness of the upper creek. With little or no boat travel, this part of the creek was essentially forgotten. Yes many towns border the creek but except for a few kayakers or jet skiers it is largely seldom used. This has helped preserve its natural beauty and wildlife. Many areas of the upper creek show little signs of pollution and trash

From the Township of Mt Laurel web site:

In the 19th Century, Mount Laurel saw several small villages arise including Masonville, Centerton and Fellowship. Agricultural products supported residents and were transported via the Rancocas Creek. Goods were transported on the Rancocas Creek on flat-bottomed boats called scows.

In 1863, the Burlington-Camden Railroad was built. Centerton, located near the Moorestown border, thrived because of its wharf, lumber and coal yard, phosphorus factory, tavern and the Centerton Hotel. Centerton was a popular vacation spot for families from Philadelphia seeking

the tranquility of the countryside during the hot summer months in the city.

Masonville grew when a highway was built in 1794 and is still a community today, located just east of Moorestown. The village was named after the James Mason Plantation and included about 100 people, an iron factory, facing mill, a railroad freight and passenger depot and Darnell's Grist and Sawmill. Also in Masonville was the 1,800 acre tract granted to John Borton by King Charles II in 1716. The home of the late Senator C. William Haines, Jr. and his wife Sally rests upon the foundation of the original house built by his ancestor John Borton.

The history of Timbuctoo on Wikipedia is accurate:

Timbuctoo was founded by free blacks and former slaves around 1820, in a township surrounded by Quaker communities. Timbuctoo appeared on Burlington County maps as early 1849, and continues to appear on maps today.

In 1860 the "Battle of Pine Swamp" took place in Timbuctoo, and it was reported in the *New Jersey Mirror*, a local newspaper. It involved armed residents of Timbuctoo preventing the capture of Perry Simmons, a fugitive slave living in Timbuctoo, by a southern slave catcher.

The US Census identified the "Village of Timbuctoo" as a separate entity within Westampton Township for the first time in 1880, enumerating 108 residents and 29 households.

Today, the key remaining evidence of Timbuctoo's historical significance is a cemetery, which contains graves of black Civil War Veterans. Some current residents and landowners date back to the early 20th century. At least two families are descendants of early 19th century settlers.

This link talks about a 2010-11 Temple University Dig around old foundations of homes in the area. <http://www.archaeologicalconservancy.org/artifacts-former-slaves-village-tell-historic-tale/>

Ancient Indians.

Rancocas Pathways plans to make 'Melpine Landing' their primary public access point. It turns out many of the Indian artifacts and traces of settlement have come from this area.

A Geological/Archaeological Survey Report commissioned by the State of New Jersey in 1913 confirmed various tribes of the Lenape Indian roamed throughout the area that would eventually be New Jersey. They documents sites on the Rancocas as well as others from all parts of the State dating back 10-15,000 years. Historical reports from early settlers in the area coming off sailing ships on the Delaware River remark about the only people living in this wilderness are Indians.

There have been several digs for Indian artifacts by various institutions as recently as 2005 <http://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/prehistoric-native-americans-and-archaeology/>
<http://historiccamdencounty.com/ccnews103.shtml>

Timeline of the formation of Rancocas Pathways: nonprofit registered 501c3 organization.

Founded 2014, after being pushed to paddle down the Rancocas creek. Received non-profit letter in 2016. Formed in response to the National Water Trail (NWT) application required a non-profit entity to guide the application and provide oversight of the NWT proper. Rancocas Pathways facilitates a diverse volunteer membership focused on enhancing public access.

Principal aim: ensure, enhance and promote public access on the heritage of the Rancocas creek

Mission: create a program and partnerships that provides timely data, products and services r/t the NWT and the SP Bluetrail (NJ's finest natural treasure, "*Hidden from Plain View*") and ensure the widest use possible of the Rancocas Creek.

Vision: Rancocas Pathways is the organizational catalyst that actively engages interested parties and individuals that engages and supports safe, sustainable multi-use of the Rancocas Creek.

Goal: official applicant and educational entity of the Rancocas creek national water trail application.

- Objective 1: facilitate formal codification of Rancocas state park blue water trail;
- Objective 2: foster regional awareness of Rancocas creek heritage, conservation and recreation through the Rancocas creek community advisory council (RCCAC);
- Objective 3: enhance and promote multi-use public access on the Rancocas state park blue water trail and the Rancocas creek;
- Objective 4: hold year-round kayak and natural history excursions on the Rancocas Creek and other tidewater creeks;
- Objective 5: develop Melpine Landing as a year-round kayak livery and location for programs on conservation, education and recreation;
- Objective 6: grow a sustainable board of directors and volunteers of the state park water trail

References

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- *The Secret Town fed by the Underground Railroad.* NPR 2010
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- *Archaeologists find a boon in the Pinelands.* New York Times. Anthony Depalma 1982
- *Thousands of Native American artifacts unearthed in Camden archaeological dig.* The Inquirer 2018 Kevin Riordan
- *Artifacts dug up in Ewing - Native American remains found.* The Times. Carmen Cusido 2011
- *Excavation of sites such as Timbuctoo, N.J., is helping to rewrite African American history.* Washington Post, DeNeen Brown 2010

Images by Rancocas Pathways and Stockton University.

Appendix

- A. Support Letter for Rancocas Pathways for Nomination Process to National Water Trail Register of the National Parks Service.
- B. Article in Delaware Currents magazine about Rancocas Pathways.

Appendix A

John Anderson for Rancocas Pathways

November 2017
National Recreational Trails
Redding, CA.

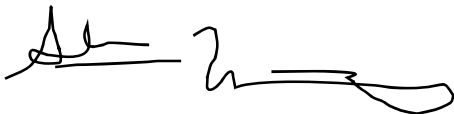
Re: National Water Trail Application: Rancocas Creek Water Trail

I fully and enthusiastically endorse the Rancocas Creek Water Trail application to become a National Water Trail under the National Parks System. University students and I have been working over the past 18 months mapping the underwater maritime cultural heritage along the north and south branches of the creek using both a Klein 3900 and Hummingbird Mega Chirp 12 side scan sonars.

While natural succession and land development has altered much of the bordering land on sides of the banks of the creek, underwater there remains substantial traces of structure, wrecks and heritage visible only through sonar data/imagery.

Examples include old dock pilings from the site of the Rowan Estate, and sites of past phosphorus plants and sand/brick factories, private landings and suspected mill sites all built over the known 300-year history of the area. Marine archaeology students mapped a section of the creek near what is named Grubbs Run where we found evidence of pilings near sites of brick/sand works are marked on 1887 Burlington County land maps in the National Landmark area known as Timbuctoo.

With so much history above and also below the creek, future users of the waterway can enjoy a culturally rich heritage of local history along the entire length of the creek from headwaters to its confluence with the Delaware River. This nomination will enable local towns, schools, businesses and non-profit organization to provide a multi-cultural experience of both history and nature.



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Appendix B.



Delaware CURRENTS

[A news magazine about the Delaware River and the people who use it.](#)



John Anderson, community activist, stands by the North Branch of the Rancocas Creek in Westampton, N.J. The view is upriver towards the town of Mt. Holly. MEG MCGUIRE PHOTO

**Rancocas Creek:
A small creek with big ideas**

By Meg McGuire March 21, 2017

THE RANCOCAS CREEK in southern New Jersey twists and turns on the map like Christmas curly ribbon with its headwaters deep in the Pine Barrens, it flows west and empties into the Delaware River across from northeast Philadelphia.

It snakes its way through some pretty typical South Jersey development.

And then it doesn't.

If you look at Google Maps, from where the New Jersey Turnpike crosses the creek (near where the two branches converge) east to Mt. Holly, you discover a great polygon of green, beginning where the north and south branches of the creek separate. Most of that land is the Rancocas State Park and some of it is farmland. Green patches haphazardly abut the creek wherever it runs.

Standing on the bank of the North Branch, you can watch as the tide pushes the waters up toward Mt. Holly and back down again. Marsh grasses populate the farther banks. And the sky is bigger than seems possible.

You feel isolated from the hubbub of metropolitan Philadelphia only 17 miles away. Here, the creek seems forgotten.

It isn't.

John Anderson discovered this remarkable place about five years ago, and he wants other people to discover the joys of this placid creek — preferably on the water, not just on its banks.

Anderson is an avid kayaker and a life-long community activist. And he dreams big dreams for this creek.

He's heading up a community application to the National Parks Service to make this creek — all of it — a National Water Trail, a designation that brings bragging rights but no money. Most of the investment in the project so far is sweat equity, which is fine by Anderson.

And just to illustrate how ambitious this project is, there are only 21 such trails in the United States. Two of them are in New York: the Hudson River Greenway Water Trail and the Bronx River Blueway. (More about Water Trails [here](#).)

There are none in the Delaware River watershed and none in the rest of Pennsylvania, New Jersey or Delaware.



Looking downriver at the North Branch of the Rancocas Creek, flowing toward the Delaware River about nine miles away. MEG McGUIRE PHOTO Anderson reckons that the way to preserve the peacefulness of this setting is to bring people here to appreciate it and they will help him conserve what he clearly loves.

He's already doing that.

Listen to Melissa Rozecki (taken from an email conversation about the creek):

I actually discovered the trail via Facebook. John had posted about a summer solstice paddle. Not a kayaker, 50+ and pretty lazy, I thought it looked cool but didn't do it.

A few weeks later (in July of last summer) I decided to message John about opportunities to rent kayaks and possibly go with others. My boys had kayaked as scouts and encouraged me to give it a shot despite my fear of ending up in the creek.

John emailed me back and said that if I didn't mind listening to him talk about the trail and the history and his plans and take them back to the Boy Scouts (where I work, and also right across from Melpine Landing).

My son and I met John at the landing and we set off. Remember I had never kayaked before! The next thing I know I was in downtown Mt. Holly! Little did I know we were working with the tide :)

My son and I learned about the history of the area and had a very enjoyable day.

I went back to work and shared my adventure with anyone who would listen. Boy Scouts came out to help clear the landing and I believe a few have been working with John on Eagle Scout projects!

At that point Melpine Landing access was barely wide enough to get to the water.

The Boy Scouts as a whole are not involved but various local troops have been involved. Troop 2764 from Burlington is the one that I know about that is working on an Eagle Project proposal for the creek.

As someone who has hiked the land area along parts of the blue trail, I think it is a great resource that very few people know about.

This contagious enthusiasm becomes a leitmotif in many of the comments about Anderson and this project.

"Nobody but John and a few of his friends have seen the possibility here," said Steve Nagiewicz, who teaches Underwater Archeology and Marine Science at Stockton University in Galloway, N.J. He's collaborating with Anderson in discovering the creek's history, using sonar to see beneath the surface, to see into the past.

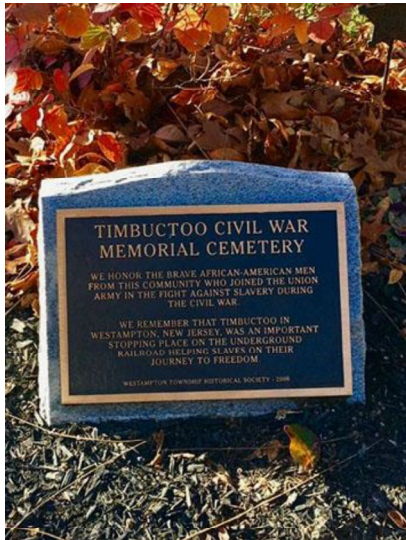
Many creeks have businesses that have lined their banks for decades or even hundreds of years. Not here.

"Once the turnpike bridges were put in," said Nagiewicz, "they effectively cut off the creek and it sort of was forgotten."

But that "forgetting" is key to reaping a fascinating crop of historical footprints of commerce and trade along what was once an important watery highway.

That's one of the criteria for the National Water Trails designation — that there needs to be some historical or cultural significance to the waterway. And though the creek looks undeveloped now, it was the major highway for this area in the 1700s when there weren't good roads. So there are half-submerged docks, remnants of dams and foundations of forgotten buildings.

Nagiewicz is struck by how simultaneously unblemished by the present day the area is, as well as rich in history.



Timbuctoo, N.J., just off the Rancocas Creek, is a settlement founded in the 1820s by free blacks and former slaves. Below, a cemetery in Timbuctoo honors African-American soldiers from the Civil War with markers showing the letters GAR, for Grand Army of the Republic. STEVE NAGIEWICZ PHOTOS

"I've been out with John and his friends and we're hip deep in mud and I've never seen garbage, never seen evidence of drinking or fires," he said. "There seems to be nothing there but when you clear away the brush, you see old foundations, old mill runs."

Up another small creek off the North Branch called Grubbs Run is a small community called Timbuctoo, founded by free blacks and former slaves in the 1820s — some 40 years before the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. Hidden and out of the way, this was a stop on the Underground Railway run by blacks for blacks.

There's a Civil War cemetery with a plaque placed by the Westampton Historical Society in 2006 that commemorates the citizens of Timbuctoo who fought and died in the war. Descendants of the original families still live in the community.

The North Branch in the towns of Westampton and Mt. Holly is the focus of the work so far. Both towns support the project. Westampton Mayor André Daniels raves: "Absolutely in favor, enthusiastically support the National Water Trails designation. It's beautiful there. We have hawks and beavers. Things you read about or see on TV."

The South Branch, which wends its way up to Hainesport and Lumberton, is home to more expansive tidal marshes, and has its own story to tell — there were sand mines there and that sand was used to help build Philadelphia.

Nagiewicz' ambition is to use sonar to see underwater the length of both branches as well as the unified creek to the Delaware about 10 miles away.

In the town of Mt. Holly, the Christmas ribbon turns itself into almost a bow and circles back on itself not once but twice thanks to an oxbow in the stream, a dam and the work of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to mitigate flooding.

Randi Rothmel, chairwoman of the town's Environmental Advisory Committee, says that her committee is not working directly on the plan but is supports it.

"The stream in the town is underutilized, and the town generally wants to make it a focal point, " she said. Her committee has submitted a proposal for some grant money to allow building of more landings, making the connection of the upstream to the downstream easier for kayakers and canoers, Above Mt Holly, Burlington County has paid attention to the creek, designating it the Rancocas Creek Canoe Trail.

The possibility for young people to learn about and use the water safely is the chief reason for Sean Kennedy, the town recreation director, to support the project. Once again it was Anderson who helped him see the possibilities that the creek provides.

Anderson is forming a network through the two towns and beyond. Chris Linn from the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission got involved when the DVRPA was asked by Mt. Holly to prepare its Public Access Plan, focused on ways to improve and protect public access to the Rancocas Creek in Mt. Holly. He wrote:

"Our main interest is enhancement of recreational opportunities in Mount Holly, conservation of lands along the creek to promote environmental quality and water quality, reductions of potential loss of life and property from catastrophic flooding by preserving floodplains in their natural state to the greatest extent possible, and improvements which will lead to economic development and a stronger tax base."

And one more partner — New Jersey's Department of Environmental Protection. John Trontis, NJDEP's assistant director of Parks and Forests, notes that Anderson is helping with a simultaneous project of Park Superintendent Dave Robins and Regional Superintendent Tom Keck to obtain funding to make this part of the creek a state "blue" (water) trail. They, in turn, are supporting Anderson's federal application.

Much like the creek itself, there are twists and turns to make a project like this come to life.

"We have to protect this," Anderson says simply. He leaves it to others to celebrate his energy.

Nagiewicz sums him up nicely: "He's passionate to the point of obsession."

And as Mayor Daniels point out: "Not everyone has that zeal, fortitude and stick-to-it-ive-ness that John has.

"Every community should have one."