

Donald L. Corey – The history of Wilson Mill Park

Today I'm pleased to be able to give you a little background on the history of this site and on the creation of this park.

Before King Philip's War in 1675-1676 there was a Native American village just east of here in what is now Burlington. What we now call Crosby Hill had been Indian Hill from Colonial times until mid 20th century. King Philip's War was the Indians' last effort to push Colonists back to the coast and to regain their land. During the war Bacon's Mill (just a short distance from here) was burned, and the only settlers in this area - Michael Bacon and Timothy Brooks - fled.

After the war, the village was abandoned, so the falls here became an ideal site for a water-powered mill. Rev. Jonathan Mitchell had received a grant of this land in return for his services as Cambridge's 2nd minister. John Wilson leased this portion and built his corn mill in about 1676, making this one of the very earliest Colonial sites in Bedford. He did so well that within just a few years he was able to buy the land from Rev. Mitchell's widow. Billerica's leaders quickly recognized the mill's importance to the town, and in 1683 Billerica voted to require every man in town "to give one day's work ... for the making of a sufficient way to John Wilson's corn-mill". John Wilson later served as a Billerica Selectman and as a State Representative, and he was one of the petitioners to organize our town -Bedford.

This mill was a major employer here for centuries. A sawmill for lumber was added to the corn mill, in 1840 a paper mill was established, later a blind and sash factory, and then a paint mill. It was Staples Cider Mill in the 1890s. After a bad fire at the mill in the 1800s it was estimated that 10% of Bedford's population lost their jobs. Regrettably, by the end of WW2 the water-powered mill was no longer needed. With the construction of the Route 3 intersection here in 1953, remnants of the mill were almost entirely destroyed. The land formerly occupied by the mill and millpond became divided between multiple owners.

For at least the next 40 years, this site was more or less abandoned, but a few people including Mimi Adler kept its history alive. By the 1990s when the site was again threatened, she had some allies. An abutter planned to build a residence in the ravine in 1996, and several of us attended hearings with Mimi to object to the proposal, which was eventually turned down based on both legal and practical considerations. Meanwhile John Filios, Historic Preservation Committee Chair, met with the owners' lawyer and negotiated a selling price for that lot from an original asking price of \$67,000 down to \$6,700, with the promise to install a bronze plaque memorializing the generosity of the family. John earned his stripes that day.

The town already owned the Old Burlington Road with the dam, and it had acquired by tax title the parcel where the mill building had been located. With the purchase of the lot on the opposite side of the brook the idea of a historic and recreational park took shape. The plan really crystallized when the Zion Alliance Church was unable to develop its land by the millpond and sold that upstream open space to the town.

In 2000 Neil Leary, as Project Manager for the Historic Preservation Committee, obtained a matching grant from the State to prepare both a nomination application to add Wilson Mill to the National Register of Historic Places and a Preservation Plan for the site. Some of you may recall that at about the same time Mass Highway picked this site for a commuter Park and Ride parking lot. Fortunately, the State's plans for turning it into a huge parking lot died. The Conway School of Landscape Design completed their conceptual plan for a park here in 2001, and the National Park Service added this site to its National Register of Historic Places in 2003.

Since then other individuals and groups, in particular the Wilson Mill Park Committee and DPW, have done a wonderful job of making this park a reality with Community Preservation funds despite some recent daunting hurdles. They rightly deserve enormous credit for making the park a reality.