

Early Colonial History

Source: Bournedale the Forgotten Village, Donald Jacobs, 1996, Wm S. Sullwold Publishing, Taunton, MA

Early European settlement near Plymouth typically occurred in places where rivers sloped towards the coast, and where dams and factories could be built to harness power from the racing water. The Herring River, running south from Great Herring Pond (then known as Manomet Lake) was important to early industry as water power was generated from its 30-foot drop to the Manomet River (later known as the Monument River, and even later becoming part of the Cape Cod Canal). The Herring River was also a center of Wampanoag community and culture, located along the major Wampanoag (and also early European) travel routes between Plymouth, Cape Cod, Massachusetts Bay, and Buzzards Bay with routes to the south.

Peaceful relations between the local Wampanoags and early European settlers gradually led to Colony developments along the Herring River, and especially the section that is now known as Bournedale (but until 1884 was called North Sandwich). Earliest industrial development (~1695) included a grist mill in what is now Bournedale. With subsequent building of dams and water-wheels, industrial development followed through the 1700's and into the late 1800's. The lower parts of the Herring River grew to a thriving business community including mills and forges serving industries of Sandwich, Cape Cod, and New Bedford. Related industries included saw mills, axe and nail factories, blacksmith shops, railroad and rail-car construction, machine shops, and businesses built on the prolific migrations of River Herring. But with development of steam power in the late 1800's, the manufacturing advantage afforded by water-power began to dwindle. Development of the Cape Cod Branch Railroad preserved a commercial bustle to the village, including its added function as a destination for summer visitors and residents from cities such as Boston and New York.



Photo by Melissa Wakeman

River Herring were a 'life support' to native tribes long before European settlement of the Plymouth region. Indeed, the spring and summer camp of the local Comassakumkanets was near the south end of Manomet Lake (now Great Herring Pond), where herring were taken and dried for later year-round uses, including food (fresh or dried for winter) and as fertilizer for corn. Colonial settlers increased the use of the Herring, but unlike the Wampanoags, took far more than what was needed for local uses (with trade reaching as far as the Caribbean).

Colonial management of the herring fishery was mixed, but generally followed two lines: Prior to 15 April herring could be taken by the general public, but starting the 15th the harvest was given to the 'buyer of the river', a right won by auction sponsored by the Town. These rights allowed for harvesting on three days a week, but residents and auction winners alike found various ways to thwart the conservation limits. A large and often controversial harvest grew through the 1700's and 1800's to a point where the 'flood' of fish that once entered and spawned in Herring Pond had dwindled to a trickle. In modern times fishing boats working far off of Massachusetts shores are thought to be responsible for the increased rate of decline since the start of the 21st Century. A mere remnant of the historical numbers of River Herring now reach our watershed ponds.

Construction of the Cape Cod Canal began in 1909, connecting what had been courses of the Sandwich River from Cape Cod Bay and the Manomet River from Buzzards Bay. Bournedale and the Herring River watershed saw major changes, with homesteads and businesses removed and roads and water-courses altered. At the same time, Bournedale's lifeblood from the railroad was removed to the far side of the canal. Private canal operation ended with its purchase by the US Government in 1928. Widening and deepening, and construction of the route 6 highway alongside, followed between 1934 and 1940. Once again the watershed village had more of its buildings removed, leaving only a small remnant of its former history. The course of the Herring River became channeled under the highway alongside the canal; inclusion of fish ladders preserved the herring run. Still, much of the remaining Herring River north of Bournedale still originates at the south end of Great Herring Pond and still courses along the eastern boundary of lands designated in 1700 for use by Wampanoags.