

Beaver Brook flows through our history

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Many New England villages have been built up around mill ponds, and Chelmsford Center is no exception.

Although many people who have moved to this area in the past few years may not be aware of it, the mill pond just out of Central Square provided a source of power for nearly 250 years.

The pond was made by damming up a section of Beaver Brook, the stream that passes under Central Square. The "lower dam" was located near the end of Cushing Place, and there was an "upper dam" about 1000 feet upstream.

History tells us that the first mill in the center of town was erected in 1678 by John Parker and a deed dated Dec. 29, 1679 mentions a saw mill and "both ye upper & lowr Dam."

Rev. Ebenezer Bridge wrote in his diary in 1771, "Raised a floom (flume) at my upper dam," which was on Beaver Brook. The grist mill, located just beyond where the brook crosses under Cushing Place, continued to operate under several different owners until well into the 20th century.

For many years ice was harvested from the Mill Pond and stored in an ice house behind the Mill Dam Building on Acton Road. The pond was also a favorite place to skate. As recently as the 1950's, the local Kiwanis club cleared away the brush and flooded it for skating one winter.

The way It was

By George A.
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The pond also had a least one tragedy.

On Saturday, July 5, 1890, Arthur D. Nason, the eight-year-old only child of Mr. and Mrs. Fred E. Nason, was drowned when he lost his balance and fell off a narrow raft on the mill pond about 20 feet from the embankment at the head of the pond.

"Two of his mates were on the bank, and as soon as they realized the peril of their companion ran for help," was how accounts read. "A large number of the village people were soon on the spot, and several young men plunged into the pond, and by diving made strenuous efforts to recover the body, but it was not before three-fourths of an hour had elapsed, and the water had been partially drawn off that their endeavors were successful. Attempts at resuscitation were made under the direction of Dr. Howard, but life was extinct."

In a less tragic accident the newspaper reported: "Stanley Cotton recently had an experience which he would not care to repeat.

"He was on the mill pond standing upon a piece of ice which, while fast to the shore, projected some distance into the pond. A companion sprang upon the same piece, which gave way and young Cotton was suddenly decorated with the order of the bath, by dropping into water where it was five feet deep. He grasped a cake of ice and kept up till his associates could get near enough to grasp his hand, when he succeeded in reaching a more solid footing."

A somewhat similar event took place on a warm spring day in the early 1930's when three young men stepped onto an icepan about 30 feet square in a cove at the upper end of the pond. Actually the pond at that time was little more than a shallow brook of open water. The adventurers pushed the icepan out into the moving stream and rode it toward the lower dam.

Before they realized it, the water had melted their ice raft. It was only about three by six feet and barely able to support them so they decided the only thing to do was to step off into slightly more than waist deep ice water and walk ashore with no ill effects other than being very wet and cold.

The present writer can attest to this report as a firsthand witness. He was one of the foolish trio.

And, that's the way it was.

George A. Parkhurst is a Chelmsford historian whose family has lived in town since 1654.