

## On the Banks of the Rahway

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By Robert Fridlington

The Rahway River has played a vital role in Cranford's history and lore. It was the river that attracted the first settlers who moved west from the Elizabethtown settlement. It was the river that powered the mills that were built along its banks and that provided recreation for the residents—swimming, fishing, skating. It was also the river that inspired the picturesque carnivals that annually reassured the residents that they indeed lived in an enchanted place.

The river was all these things and more, but one of its other attributes has usually been ignored or spoken of in hushed tones. For decades the river was a common sewer.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century residents along the banks of the Rahway routinely ran waste pipes directly into the river. As the population grew, so did the problems. It seems to have become particularly acute after running water became available in the early 1890's and plumbing moved indoors.

The situation became so bad that in June 1894, the Board of Health met to consider cleaning the river of weeds. Eliminating the weeds would increase the current, thereby washing offensive matter downstream.

The town counsel, Judge Cross, declared that public money could not be spent on such projects. It would have to be paid for by private subscriptions, he said. This was too much for Edward Beadle, one of the many residents who turned out for the meeting. "The river was never so foul or sluggish as now," he warned the board, "and it is constantly growing worse." A sickly, green scum covered the surface at many points, he said, and fetid matter created frightful odors. An equally indignant E.K. Adams declared that the river had become the depository for dead dogs and cats "from whose putrefying carcasses nauseating odors arose."

Dr. J.K. MacConnell, Cranford's physician, maintained that the river did not threaten public health, so the Board of Health had no authority to impose a tax to clean it up. But if property owners along the river each contributed \$5.00, he thought a thorough cleaning job could be done.

An angry James W. Ferguson replied that one didn't need a medical education to judge the river's condition—a nose in working order and a modicum of horse sense would do. If the Board simply required the pipe owners to extend them out further into the river, much of the foul smell would be eliminated.

And the outcome? The Board finally agreed to request a subscription from every property owner whose sewage poured into the Rahway. Later the Board also voted the sum of \$50.00 for river cleanup. But an August report notes that only \$20.40 of that appropriation had been expended.

While the river debate dragged on, however, the Township Committee was entertaining proposals for a sewer system, and here action was more decisive. The following year, the new sewer became a reality.

The sewer line did not end river pollution (just ask the members of today's River Committee), but it certainly eliminated the worst of the offenses. Residents were able to enjoy the river, the Carnivals continued, and the town one again was proud to call itself the "Venice of New Jersey."