

At Home in Waterbury

The Brass Industry and Waterbury Neighborhoods

Guiding Questions:

- How does where we live affect how we live?
- How and why do places change over time?
- How do the natural resources in a place affect the culture and affect that region's ability to be a part of the global community?
- How does population density affect the availability of resources?
- Why are certain places more populated than others?
- How does technology influence connections among human settlements and the diffusion of culture?

Objectives:

- Learn about the neighborhoods of Waterbury
- Develop an understanding of larger historical themes in U.S. History and how they relate to local history
- Understand an important piece of Waterbury's history and how the city has changed over time

Associate Activities

- Photographing Industrial Heritage
- Waterbury Then and Now Scavenger Hunt

Becoming Waterbury

About 11,5000 years ago Ice-Age conditions came to an end and meant that Native Americans would inhabit the land now known as Connecticut. These people were part of a larger group of Native Americans identified by the language they spoke, Eastern Algonquin, and who spread across the entire Northeastern area of present-day United States and into Canada. The major tribe in what is now the Waterbury region was the Tunxis people. The Tunxis lived close to the Farmington River, where land was particularly fertile, as well as living more to the west, where Waterbury and the surrounding towns are today. Just about 384 years ago, in 1636, Connecticut was settled by English colonists and was known as the River Colony or the Colony of Connecticut. Settlers formed farming towns—for which the land proved to be too rocky to be profitable—and later, turned to industry, harnessing the power of Connecticut’s many rivers. In the Waterbury area, colonists drew from the rapidly flowing Naugatuck River.

The damming of the Naugatuck River facilitated the development of an industrial landscape and played a crucial role in the growth of the Naugatuck Valley’s economy starting with the arrival of the earliest European settlers in the region. As early as the mid-17th century colonists relied upon gristmills and sawmills that drew power from dammed waterways to build houses, barns, and fences. Starting with brass buttons in the early years of the 19th century, the people of the Naugatuck Valley soon produced a multitude of brass products including snap fasteners, clock hinges, watches, electrical wire, and artillery shells. At its peak, the Naugatuck Valley was called the Brass Capitol of the world.

The growth of manufacturing and industrialization in the United States throughout the 19th century resulted in the increased population of cities. By the 1830s, many people began to move from the countryside to urban areas seeking opportunities in factories and to live in cities. By the end of the 19th century, much of the growth of cities was due to immigration into the United States from all over the world.

Growth of U.S. Cities at the Turn of the 20th Century		
1880	1900	1920
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20% of Americans lived in cities • 11 cities had a population over 100,00 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 38% of Americans lived in cities • 18 cities had a population over 100,000 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 68% of Americans lived in cities • 26 cities had a population over 100,000

Growth of Waterbury Population in the 19 th Century				
1850	1880	1900	1910	1914-1918 (World War I)
5,000	20,000	45,000	73,000	100,000

The People of Waterbury

Waterbury is sometimes described as a city of neighborhoods. It was developed over time by those who lived here; shaped by their cultural, religious, and social practices. Many of the people who came to the city for the opportunity to work in the factories came from other places. Though it was difficult to leave home, for the many and varied reasons that many migrants left their hometowns, Waterbury and its brass industry offered promise to newcomers who decided to move to Waterbury. While much was left behind,



Figure 2 Untitled, signed Del Cronk, 1979.
Illustration of the dipping process in
Waterbury Button Company

migrants brought essentials with them, packed in

trunks like this one, to start their new beginning. This steamer trunk held the belongings of Antonio and Filomena Benevento when they brought over from Italy in 1907.

Just before coming to the United States, Antonio and Filomena (DeSocio) were married in Italy. Antonio was 24 years old and Filomena was 19. Antonio had a brother, Nick, who had already made Waterbury his home and had found work in the city as a builder, and so he followed Nick's advice to come to Waterbury as well. Waterbury was recovering from a fire that had destroyed much of the city in 1902, "work for him was plentiful, and Waterbury was growing by leaps and bounds into the Brass Center of the World." The story of Antonio and Filomena's migrant experience parallels many others and highlights how they made the city their home with what little they brought with them.

In the 19th many of the people arriving in Waterbury moved from Italy, Albania, Puerto Rico, Ireland, and Lithuania.



Figure 1 Steamer Trunk, c. 1907. Wood box with iron strappings. Gift of Philip Benevento, Jr., 2005



Consider you were moving to a new place and could only bring what fits in a single suitcase or a trunk, what would you bring with you? What would you choose to leave behind?

The Neighborhoods of Waterbury

The North End supported a variety of clustered neighborhoods that grew as the mills on Great Brook expanded. After the Civil War, the Waterbury Clock Company and Matthews and Willard moved to North Elm Street while Blake and Johnson, the American Pin Co., Platt Brothers Patent Button Company and the Lane Manufacturing Company expanded operations on Cherry Street and East Main Street.

- **Bishop Street Neighborhood:** began to emerge in the mid-19th century and was home to people already living locally. The 20th century saw the arrival of newcomers, including by 1911, Italian, French, Polish, and Jewish families. By the 1930s, commercial activity was evident in the neighborhood: a printer, a gas station, a vacant store, a junk dealer, a bakery. During World War II, African American families from the south coming to work in the Waterbury factories settled in the neighborhood, joining earlier African American residents in the city.

- **Hill Street Neighborhood** was home to many nationalities in the 1920s. The Hillside Community Club was organized in the 1930s, while other neighborhoods in the city formed clubs to provide activities for their residents.
- **East Farms and Walnut Streets** were a residential district with large Victorian homes built in the late 1800s. During the housing crisis of World War I, Scovill Manufacturing built 150 three-bedroom row houses on Oak, Wood, and Ives Street, designed for company employees.
- **North Main** Street was a residential and commercial area. Residents who grew up in the apartments over the North Main Street stores in the 50s and 60s described neighborhood activities that combined work and recreation and involved a network of extended families and neighbors.

Brooklyn and Town Plot: in the 1850s developers arrived in the area. At the time only a few houses were on the West Side of the Naugatuck River, but by the end of the 19th century the area was a “city within a city” with close to 5,000 people. It was developed for families that worked in nearby mills. By the 1870s the streets at the center of the center of Brooklyn were established, including Port Street Extension, Dodd Street, Charles Street Extension, Wilson Street and part of Congress Avenue. At the end of the 19th century the diverse population included Irish, Polish, Russian, Jewish, and Italian families. Irish began to arrive in the 1860s followed by the Polish and Lithuanian communities. Italian families began to arrive in 1900 and found housing in tenements along the Naugatuck River. At its height, the neighborhood supported five grammar schools, three drug stores, three theaters, eight bakeries, two breweries, a library, a firehouse, a YMCA, and 22 taverns. By World War II, the area was home to mostly Lithuanian, Italian, French, African American, and Hispanic families.

- **Town Plot** is the earliest settlement in Waterbury in the 17th century. Its development in the 20th century was encouraged by greater range of cars and bus routes, but also by the development of Chase Park and the Harrub Memorial. In the early 1960s, the state took 32 acres of Chase Park to construct the high, stacked interchange of the new Interstate 84 and Route 8, which was placed along the Naugatuck River, running through Brooklyn, and the edges of Bunker Hill and Waterville.
- **Bunker Hill Road** was laid out in 1729 to connect Town Plot and Watertown as part of a north-south colonial network. Until the late 19th century Town Plot was a farming and agricultural area supported by milk and wheat wholesalers and other delivery services that began along Watertown Avenue after the Civil War. In the early 20th century, local landowners and developers purchased farms for low density housing to support Waterbury’s growing middle class.

Hillside and **Overlook** was home to many middle-class families and the owners of the city’s largest businesses for more than a century.

- **The Hillside** in the late 19th century was home to specialized craftsmen, such as, pin makers, bookkeepers, and clock makers. The neighborhood was also home to some of the city's leading industrialists including the Benedicts, the Chases, the Fultons, the Kelloggs, the Camps, the Whites, the Haydens, and the Gosses. In the 20th century, some of the homes were converted to office spaces and campuses, while others were converted to parks or modern apartment buildings.
- **Overlook** sits at the top of Burnt Hill, above the Hillside neighborhood. The area was designed to be strictly residential and was centered around Columbia Boulevard, an expansive, landscaped street. Early residents included engineers, grocery clerks, Scovill executives, and real estate promoters. Families in the area enjoyed Fulton Park.

Long Hill, developed in the mid-20th century, was still in its early phase in the 1950s. There were few houses that could be reached by narrow dirt road. The houses were at the top of Long Hill, with Woodrow Wilson School in the back.

Waterville was settled by farmers in the 18th century attracted to the broad meadow along the Naugatuck River. The area was originally called Pine Hole and was part of the Mattatuck State Forest. Early roads to the village were laid out from the center of Waterbury through the meadows by the Naugatuck River and over Burnt Hill alongside the present-day Cooke Street. The area grew with the arrival of northbound railroad from Waterbury in 1855 and the rail lines running from the Hudson River east to Hartford. Both lines had depots in Waterville; one on the west end of chapel street and the other on Boyden Street. By 1916, the neighborhood grew to 5,000 people including longtime locals, English, Irish, German, Canadian, Italian, and Polish.

The East End was developed in the 20th century with triple-deckers and later single-family homes to house the families moving to the city for the growing industry. Among these developments were Brookdale Park, Mill Plain (in the area of Chase School), Fairlawn (off of Frost Road and East Main Street), Bouley Manor, and East Farms. St. Peter and Paul Church and the Mill Plain Union Church provided a community focus to the neighborhood, along with the activities of the East End Community Club and Hamilton Park.

Waterbury's neighborhoods benefit from the legacy of the past. Neighborhoods today are shaped by the distinctive residences of earlier generations, who built homes and neighborhoods that reflect a social structure built on extended families and close-knit community associations.

Do you recognize these neighborhoods and street names? They are likely familiar landscapes, everyday scenes that you pass through – have you ever thought of these places as having historical significance?

To read quotes pulled from an oral history project done with completed by the Mattatuck Museum in 2007 click here. The purpose of this project was to capture the diverse lives and experiences of Waterbury residents.

The Decline of Industry

After World War II industry began to change. Many factories moved out of state and overseas or required less workers because of machine automation. Jobs declined in the Waterbury area and employment shifted from manufacturing to service industries. By the 1970s, many factories in Waterbury and the Naugatuck Valley had been abandoned. There are still several key manufacturing and chemical companies that thrive here including Platt Brothers & Co., Hubbard Hall, Inc. and MacDermid, Inc.

With the employment decline the city dramatically changed in appearance. This was in part due to a natural disaster and part urban renewal. Waterbury suffered significant damage after Connecticut's Great Flood of 1955 destroyed long stretches of the Naugatuck Valley and nearly wiped out entire neighborhoods. A few years later highway construction tore apart the city with the construction of Route 8 and Interstate 84. Known locally as "The Mixmaster," the multi-level highway interchange segmented the city and split neighborhoods apart.

Although its historical reputation as "The Brass City" no longer applies today, Greater Waterbury has over 200 small manufacturers (many that process metal). High-tech innovations to the manufacturing processes, such as robotics, allows them to be competitive in the global marketplace. One area of specialty at Naugatuck Valley Community College in Waterbury is Engineering, Technology & Manufacturing. This program helps preserve the skill sets needed to keep manufacturing a continuing influence in the city. People who migrate to the area in more recent years continue to be drawn here by work opportunities in the fields of retail, government, construction, transportation, health, finance and education. Waterbury continues to be a diverse and culturally rich area, immigrant children in Waterbury schools speak 38 native languages, with Spanish being the most dominant:

Albanian, Arabic, Bangla, Bengali, Cantonese, Cape Verdean Creole, Dari, Farsi, Filipino, French, Haitian Creole, Georgian, Greek, Guyanese Creole, Italian, Karen, Kurdish, Lao, Macedonian Malay, Mandarin, Montenegrin, Pashto, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Spanish, Swahili, Tagalog, Tamil, Turkish, Twi/Fante, Urdu, Vietnamese, Yorubu, Zulu

The Brass Industry defined the growth of Waterbury and has had a large impact on the people and places of today. What do you consider the legacy of industry in Waterbury?