

"THE ASSABET RIVER"

by

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The Assabet River, winding its way through the north central part of the town, is a prominent feature of the natural beauty of the town. It enters Maynard by Russell's bridge (formerly "Dr. Wood's bridge") and passes along what may be termed the smaller Pompositticut Hill (now Assabet Heights) to the "Ben Smith Dam". At this point the waters have been turned into an artificial channel and conducted to the Mill Pond, which helps make fine village scenery. It continues on from the dam, passing the large Pompositticut Hill (now Summer Hill) thence through the center of the town and exits at the Acton town line. The name Assabet<sup>1</sup> is taken from the Indian "Algon-kin" language and means "the place where materials for making fish nets grows". There was considerable question concerning the correct spelling of the name "Assabet". It appears in the early records variously as Isabaeth, Elsabeth, Assabaeth, and otherwise.<sup>2</sup> It is generally believed to have been something approximately its present spelling, however, and to have been given the more anglicized spelling merely because of the difficulty the early settlers had in understanding the Indians.<sup>3</sup> Also, at times it has been known as Elizabeth, Elzebet, Elzibeth, Elisabeth and Elizabeth. On an old map of Sudbury by Mathias Mosman, bearing date of April 17, 1795, and made by the authority of that town in obedience to an order from the General Court of June 26, 1794, the name is spelled "Elsabeth". In a note explanatory of the map is the following statement by the author: "The rivers are also accurately surveyed and planned;

1 - "Official Program-Town of Northborough-200th Anni.-1966

2 - Records of Mass. Bay, III, 225.

3 - Hudson's - "Annals of Sudbury, Wayland & Maynard, 1891"

the river "Elsabeth" is from four to five rods wide, but there is no public bridge over the river where it joins Sudbury". On a map of Sudbury by William H. Wood, published in 1830, the name is spelled "Elizabeth". But, although the river has at times been called by what has sounded like an English word it is not probable that this was its original name. On the contrary, the evidence is that "Elizabeth" or "Elzibet" and similar ones are corruptions of the Indian word "Assabet" or "Assabaeth". At a date prior to the use of the name "Elzibeth", "Elzibet", etc., as before given, the terms "Asibath" and "Isabaeth" were used. When the lands south of the Assabet River were being laid out and proportioned to the settlers about the year 1650, the farm of William Brown is spoken of as being in the "northwest angle beyond the "Asibath River", and in the Colony Records, Vol. III, 225, with date May 22, 1651, is the statement that "Captain Willard and Lieutenant Goodenow are appointed to lay out the thousand acres of land at "Isabaeth", which Jethro the Indian mortgaged to Herman Garrett."

Another matter of consideration is that the tributary which flows into the Assabet River just above Russell's Bridge near the old "Whitman Place" was early known as Assabet Brook. It has thus been designated by tradition and document, and the term has come down to the present notwithstanding that the terms "Elizabeth", etc., have been applied to the river. We consider it, then, fairly established that the river, the locality and also the brook were called by the Indian name. The words "Elsabeth", "Elizabeth", etc., may have crept into use as corruptions of the original Indian name, and the mapmakers

doubtless took the name that was popularly used. It is probable that the Indians would have a name for a stream of such size, and also that the settlers would call it by the same name. The river was standardized as "Assabet" in 1850.

The river, which is approximately thirty miles long, originates in a swamp in the town of Westborough, about three miles south of Route 9, and flows northerly to Northborough and then northeasterly through the townships of Marlborough, Berlin, Hudson, Stow, Maynard, the southerly corner of Acton, and then into Concord. In Concord it joins with the Sudbury River to form the Concord River, which in turn continues in a northeasterly direction to its confluence with the Merrimac River at Lowell, and thence on to the Atlantic Ocean at Newburyport. The drainage area of the Assabet River is approximately 177 square miles and lies within the limits of eighteen townships. It has numerous tributaries. The basin has considerable amount of industry. Originally the industrial development was located near the river for the purpose of obtaining water power. Its commercial and residential counterparts were located near the mills because of lack of transportation. Consequently large communities such as Maynard were developed which now serve as the central hub for the supply of goods and services to the expanding residential area. Few streams in so short a length have provided the power for so many dissimilar uses. In the middle nineteenth century the river in Assabet Village turned the wheels of a woolen mill, near the center of the village where some of the finest woolen woolen of American were made; just below the center a paper mill which at one time furnished the material for one of the

daily newspapers of New England; and where the river leaves the town a powder mill, which manufactured powder for military and commercial purposes.

The building of the "Ben Smith Dam" by Knight and Maynard made it possible to use the river above the dam as a recreation area. From May 1906 to early 1920's motor boats carried passengers on the river two and from Lake Boone, which had also been created in the 1840's by the building of an earthen dam above the river at Gleasondale(Stow).

By most standards the Assabet River is normally an indolent and sometimes very sluggish stream; but during flood times it has rampaged and exhibited the fury of many a larger stream creating flood conditions and causing tremendous damage.