

Wallingford's fishing tradition runs deep

New Haven's original settlers purchased in 1638 from Quinnipiac sachem Momanguin, his councilors, Sugcogisin, signed the record his own personal symbol: a fishhook. Sugcogisin's mark not only identifies who he was, but also symbolizes the rich tradition of fishing in an area once known by Native Americans as "long and."

Fishing was not always the most reliable way of getting food, so Native Americans often applied ingenious survival skills to catching fish. While catching fish was common, the use of wood and hooks attached to stone weights were frequent, as well. Tying these hooks to line made from bark, however, was just one method New England Indians used. The use of nets and small fences for trapping fish was also very effective. Decoys were used to attract fish, and while the very skillful Intian was even able to catch fish with spear and arrow.

Centuries ago, the Native Americans in the Wallingford area caught many species of fish from the Quinnipiac River, such as brook trout and salmon. Fish that was dried in the sun or smoked over a warming fire would be mixed with their meals often consisting of corn, including succotash. Fish was also added to stews or eaten as a meal in itself. Discoveries of oyster shucks suggest that Quinnipiac Indians included shellfish in their diet. In fact, one legend claims that Sleeping Giant is the spirit of a Native American who fell asleep after eating too many oysters from Wallingford Harbor, once considered the oyster capital of the region.

The spirit's overindulgence seems to have foreshadowed the way that European colonists would eventually treat the land's resources. The overuse of the Quinnipiac River in Colonial agriculture hurt fish populations as well as the fertility of the land.

The mistreatment of the river had negative consequences for fishermen and local newspapers in the 1870s began covering the topic of conservation laws. On April 2, 1878, the *New Evening Register* reported that in North Haven, there were



LOOKING BACK
Scott Trauner

a bit of trouble and expense by refreshing their memories that the 'trout law' is not off yet, and that any further infringement by them will be followed by speedy prosecution." A few weeks later, another warning was given in the *Register*, this time for anglers in Wallingford's Community Lake: "It is to be hoped for the sake of the law, order and peace that fishing in the lake with nets will be given up."

Besides the consequences of heavy agriculture and irresponsible sportsmen, the building of dams also hindered the fishing in Wallingford. The effect that damming has had on the Quinnipiac River in Wallingford is illustrated in the *Register* on May 6, 1878: "The west end of the Quinnipiac dam was washed away a week ago last Saturday, so that shad

now come up as far as Wallace's dam. Some of our fishermen suspect they (the shad) will be stopped in the neighborhood of the Quinny to make acquaintance of some of the inhabitants." It has been documented that fish from Long Island Sound routinely made their way up to at least Wallingford before dams were built.

Wharton's Brook in Wallingford is a tributary of the Quinnipiac and is currently designated as a trout park by the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection. In his 1971 personalized history of the town, *Tales of Old Wallingford*, Clarence Hale remembers the lack of trout in Wharton's Brook during the 1890s. "I suppose no fish could or would live in Wharton's Brook today, and indeed trout had disappeared when I was a boy. There were suckers which we used to spear by torchlight up above Campbell's, and my brother and I snared about twenty-four pounds of pickerel in the pool below Simpson's dam after a torrential Autumn rain." Today, Wharton's Brook is considered one of the better trout fishing areas and the Department of Environmental Protection plans on stocking Connecticut trout parks with 500,000 fish by opening day on April 19. The practice of stocking fish was taking place in Wallingford as early as 1871 at Pistapaug Pond.

Despite the condition of Wharton's Brook in the 1890s, conservation efforts in the 19th Century must have had a positive effect on the Quinnipiac River.

the Quinnipiac River was a mecca for trout fishermen. At its peak, the river contained huge populations of yellow perch, sunfish, bullheads; suckers and eels, and very few carp." The publication, produced by the Quinnipiac River Watershed Association, claims that the river is staging a comeback and "may be one of the most underrated and overlooked rivers for recreational fishing in Connecticut." According to Charlie Sampson, owner of the Quinnipiac Fly Shop at 100 Quinnipiac St. in Wallingford, anglers are starting to recognize this. "There's been a resurgence in interest in the Quinnipiac River because the water quality has improved," he said. Sampson also serves as Treasurer of the Quinnipiac Chapter of Trout Unlimited, a national organization whose mission is "to conserve, protect and restore North America's trout and salmon fisheries and their watersheds." Sampson said that "several organizations are helping to improve the fishing."

Sampson's shop, walking distance from the Quinnipiac, is stocked with all the equipment one needs for a day on the river. Besides equipment, Sampson himself is a resource of information, offering lessons, fly tying classes, and guide service.

For anglers interested in species other than trout, North Farms Reservoir in Wallingford holds largemouth bass, brown bullheads, sunfish and chain pickerel.

Uncle B's Bait Shop at 968 North Colony Road is not far from the reservoir and offers a wide variety of equipment and bait for all types of fishing. Owner Brandon Szadaj knows firsthand that Wallingford's lakes and ponds promise good fishing. "Some of the better bass fishing I've done is here in Wallingford," he said. He recalls catching a five and a half-pound largemouth bass in the North Farms Reservoir and says they get even bigger than that. "I know there are bigger ones in there."

With a rise in the number of responsible anglers and the efforts of conservation groups, we can only hope that Wallingford's fishing resources will be brought back to the condition they were in centuries ago when men like Sugcogisin stood on their banks.

Scott Trauner is a Wallingford resident who is writing a series of articles on the town's history. He can be reached at