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The Connecticut River and its Change of Course over Time

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The earliest European settlers along the Great River in Connecticut experienced several severe floods in the 17th Century. The earliest of these floods was triggered by a storm that began on 5 March 1638/9 and went on until 18 March 1638/9. Four days later, on 22 March 1638/9 the flood crested. The three earliest towns along the river, that is, Hartford, Windsor, and Wethersfield, had only been settled for three years. In his Journal, Gov. Winthrop of Massachusetts stated that, "There came such a rain withall, as raised the waters at Connecticut some twenty feet above their meadows, etc."¹ Certainly the loss of meadow and crops at this time must have been a severe hardship for people who might still only have been living in dugout homes.

The next flood was actually two floods, both occurring in the summer of 1683. The Rev. Cotton Mather wrote about these floods in his book *Remarkable Providences*. He stated:

Some remarkable land floods have likewise happened in New England. Nor is that which came to pass this present year to be here wholly passed over in silence. In the spring time, the great river at Connecticut useth to overflow, but this year it did so after midsummer, and that twice; for, July 20, 1683, a considerable flood unexpectedly arose, which proved detrimental to many in that colony. But on August 13, a second and more dreadful flood came; the waters were then observed to rise twenty-six feet above their usual boundaries; the grass in the meadows, also the English grain, was carried away before it; the Indian corn by the long continuance of the waters is spoiled so that the four river towns, viz[ualize]: Windsor, Hartford, Weathersfield [sic], Middle-Town [sic], are extream [sic] sufferers. They write from thence, that some who had hundreds of bushels of corn in the morning, at night had not one peck for their families to live upon. There is an awful intimation of Divine displeasure remarkable in this matter, inasmuch as August 8, a day of public humiliation, with fasting and prayer was attended in that colony, partly on the account of God's hand against them in the former flood, the next week after which the hand of God was stretched out over them again in the same way, after a more terrible manner than at first.²

The Connecticut River continued to flood annually in the Spring and to flood in greater measure from time to time. Stiles gives the following flood heights:³

1692 26 feet, 2 inches

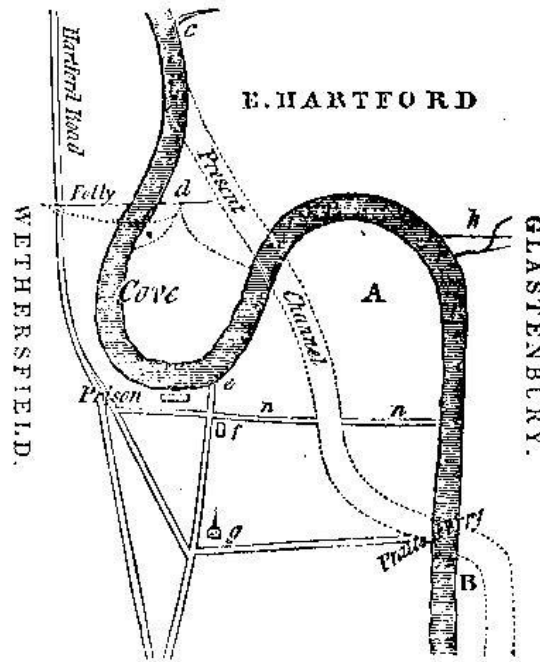
¹ Henry R. Stiles, *The History of Ancient Wethersfield, Connecticut*, vol. I, p. 712, citing Winthrop's *Hist. of New England* (Savage's Edition), I, p. 352.

² Stiles, *The History of Ancient Wethersfield, Connecticut*, vol. I, p. 712, citing Mather's *Remarkable Providences* (1856 edition of the original published at Boston, 1684), p. 232.

³ Stiles, *The History of Ancient Wethersfield, Connecticut*, vol. I, pp. 712-713.

1801	27 feet, 3 inches
1839	23 feet
1840	25 feet, 6 inches
1843	26 feet, 3 inches
1852	23 feet
1853	28 feet, 10½ inches

Each new flood had the force to drive a straighter course for the Great River. In time, the course that had meandered between Hartford and Wethersfield became straighter and straighter. The map published by John Warber Barber in *Connecticut Historical Collections* shows in dark the old channel and in dotted lines the new channel.



According to Barber, “The tract A contains a number of hundred acres of good land, over which the river has gradually passed to its present course, from the old channel seen in the diagram, which is now obliterated. The town of Wethersfield maintaining its old bounds, it will be perceived that the tract A, although on the east side of the river, is within the bounds of Wethersfield... and it will be perceived that the tract B is within the limits of Glastonbury.”⁴

This sometimes gradual, sometimes cataclysmic change of the river’s course had its impact on the family of Samuel² Welles. Like his brother Thomas², Jr., he died intestate and his estate was subject to the legal division of the dower third and shares to the children.⁵

The inventory of Samuel’s estate was taken 15 July 1675 by Samuel Talcott, John Chester, and John Deming. It came to £1100:00:00, the exact same amount that his brother

⁴ John Warner Barber, *Connecticut Historical Collections* (New Haven: Durrie & Peck and J. W. Barber, 1838), p. 15.

⁵ The estate papers of Capt. Samuel Welles appear as docket no. 5848 in Hartford Probate District Court records. Manwaring I:249-250 cites the probate court record books as III:157, 164-165; IV:14, 37, 148; and VI:159. All the material here is taken from the original papers in the estate files.

Thomas, Jr.'s estate had come to. At the end of the inventory the appraisers appended a list of Samuel's children which reads:

The names & age of Capt. Sam'l. Welles his children:
Samuell Welles aged 16 years }or thereabouts
Thomas Welles 14 years }
Sarah Welles 12 years }
Mary Welles 10 years
Ann: Welles 7 years
Elizabeth Welles 5 years

This youngest child, Elizabeth³ Welles, was to marry Daniel Shelton of Stratford. While the children were young, administration responsibilities for the estate passed through the widow Hannah Welles; John Chester (husband of Samuel's sister Sarah), and Mrs. Ann Hawkins (Samuel's older sister). Finally, the two oldest children, both sons, were able to assume responsibility for the estate.

Thomas³ Welles and his brother Samuel³ Welles, Jr., served as administrators on their father's estate. Evidently the two were late in providing the share to their sister Elizabeth, married to Daniel Shelton of Stratford. Her share came to £127:14:00 of which she had only received £80:10:00 in moveables by May 1699 when Daniel Shelton brought the issue to the attention of the General Court.⁶ One of the factors slowing the distribution of her share had been the shift of the "Great River" (now the Connecticut River) in her course late in the 17th century. This had literally caused land to be lost at Hoccanum. The court adjusted the value of the land Elizabeth was to receive to £42:10:00 and levied court costs of £2:05:00 to each of the executors. The executors were to pay Elizabeth out of their own monies. Evidently this didn't happen soon enough for Daniel Shelton, as he brought the issue to the General Court again in May 1701. It was ordered then by the assembly that each man should pay half from his own estate.⁷ Still this did not bring relief to Daniel Shelton. The General Court in May 1713 granted £7 to Daniel out of the estate of Capt. Thomas Wells, deceased. It was resolved that, should the estate not pay Shelton, then the money would come from Ephraim Goodrich and his wife who were administrators on his estate for a total of £18:15:09 together with court costs of £2:15:06.⁸ All of this adjustment because the course of the Connecticut River had changed over time.

⁶ J. Hammond Trumbull, *The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut, prior to the Union with New Haven Colony, May 1665* (Hartford: Brown & Parsons, 1850-1890), 4:294-295.

⁷ Trumbull, *The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut*, 4:355.

⁸ Trumbull, *The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut*, 5:375.