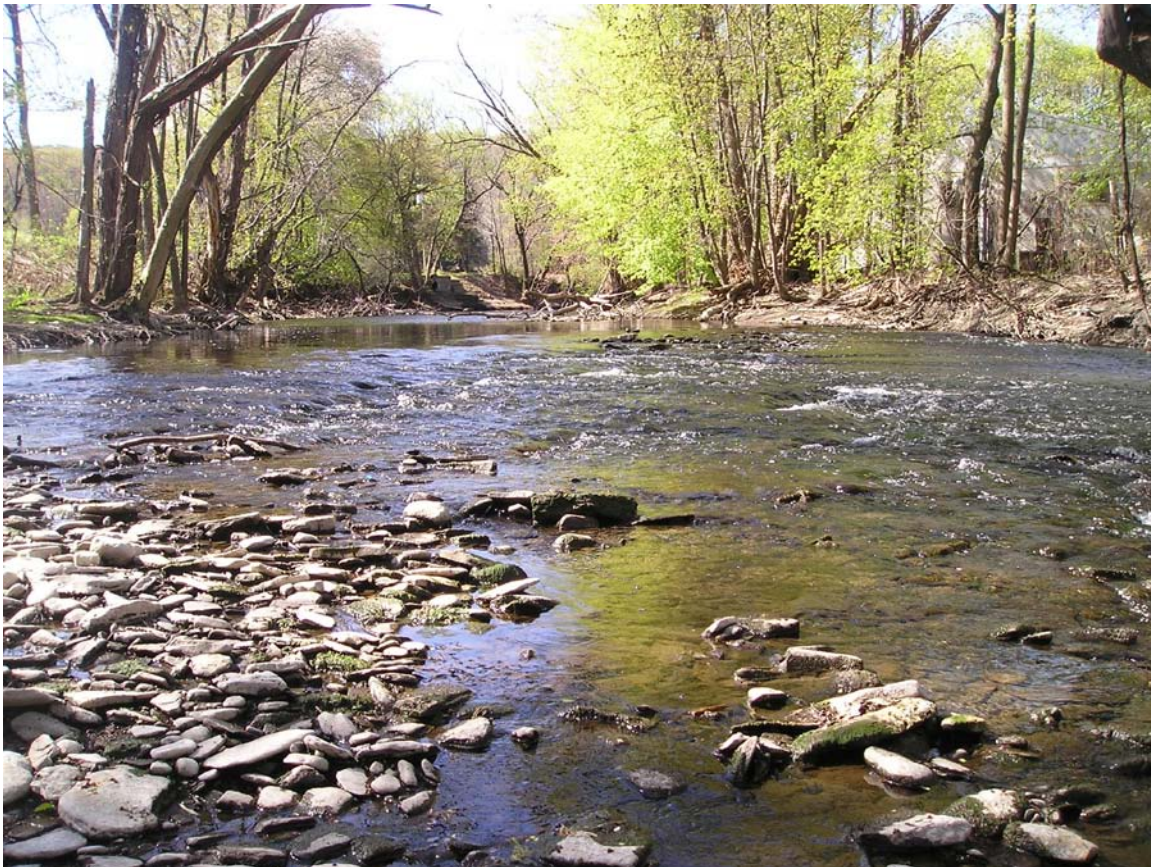


Chautauqua Watershed Notes  
From the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy  
May 17, 2009

Jamestown's Secret River  
By Mark Baldwin  
For the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy



*This wild-looking stretch of the Chadakoin River runs through an industrial/residential Jamestown neighborhood.*

Chautauqua Lake is fed by a number of inlets and springs that spill down its 176-square-mile watershed, but it has only one outlet, and that is the Chadakoin River. The Chadakoin not only drains Chautauqua Lake but it does so slowly; its shale streambed dams the lake, keeping it from draining dry like a bathtub with the plug pulled. The Chadakoin probably seems a bit mysterious to many local residents. In my role as an environmental educator, I often just get confused looks from students when I talk about the river and ask them what they know about it. Not surprising, because the Chadakoin is practically invisible to them.

I'm sure it wasn't always so. The very reason a community came to be here in the first place is because of the Chadakoin. In fact, Jamestown was known simply as "The Rapids" at first. Imagine what a May morning on the Chadakoin must have looked like

through the eyes of James Prendergast prior to 1812 when he built the first sawmill along its banks: rapids, runs and riffles flowing over bedrock ledges and glacial cobbles, the overhanging branches of red and silver maple and black willow trees shading pools full of fish rising to snap at mayflies. But soon Prendergast and others built dams and millraces and placed wheels in the Chadakoin's moving water to power sawmills, gristmills, and woolen mills. This water power enabled profitable businesses to not only mill trees into lumber, but the river itself could float the product downstream to markets in growing cities along the Allegheny, Ohio, and even the Mississippi River, to which the Chadakoin directly connects via the Cassadaga and Conewango Creeks.

Gradually, as manufacturers turned to more reliable power sources, the wheels of industry were removed from the river, but the river still served a useful purpose: as a sewer. Through pipes pointing out the back ends of riverside buildings flowed every kind of pollutant imaginable, from human waste to toxic industrial chemicals. The same buildings effectively sealed off the river from view and some were actually constructed over the river itself, effectively completing the sewer conduit metaphor.

In time, improvements in sanitation technology and environmental protection laws prompted the good citizens of Jamestown to stem the flow of poisons into the Chadakoin. Each day, millions of gallons of wastewater from the Jamestown area are treated before being dumped back into the stream, in the lower reaches of Cassadaga Creek. Still, countless conduits take aim at the Chadakoin with pollution-laced stormwater all along its run through Jamestown and Falconer. And an incredible amount of illegally dumped trash litters its bottom and its banks.

The Chadakoin still dutifully keeps Chautauqua Lake a lake, and a few sections have been spiffed up for public use. There is even talk about the importance of the Chadakoin as the connecting link of a revitalized Jamestown to Chautauqua Lake. Time will tell whether we'll succeed as a community in recognizing once again the Chadakoin's status as its primary natural asset. In the meantime take a look at Jamestown's river and take a moment to ponder its past and consider its future. It's in your hands.

The Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy will be holding its Spring Wildflower Tour, featuring JCC botanist Becky Nystrom at 1:30 PM today, Sunday, May 17th in the Spann woods at the mouth of Chautauqua Creek, on Route 5, one-quarter mile west of Route 394 at Barcelona. The CWC is a local 501(c)(3) not-for-profit, public benefit corporation supported primarily by membership donations. Its mission is to preserve, and enhance the water quality, scenic beauty and ecological health of the lakes, streams and watersheds of the Chautauqua region. To register for the tour, for more information, or to support these efforts, please call 664-2166.