

Quabbin: The Lost Valley



For thousands of years, this valley was part of the territory of the Nipmuc Indians, who referred to the area as Quabbin, or “the meeting of many waters.”

By the 17th century, their population had declined, decimated by war and disease, and the valley was rapidly settled by Europeans drawn by the abundance of water and rich farmland.

These new people called the area the Swift River Valley after their name for the three branches of the river that divided the valley.

Four towns were eventually established in the valley, Dana, Enfield, Prescott and Greenwich (green-wich) and by the mid-19th century they were thriving communities.



“It was a very pretty farm. It stood on a knoll, with maple trees growing up beside the front porch...”
Gordon Raymond, Enfield, MA

Martindale Farm, Enfield, MA

With an economy based mainly on farming, the towns were also home to small industries such as soapstone quarrying, ice-harvesting, textile manufacturing and palm leaf hat braiding.



Factory workers from the Goodman Hat Factory, Dana, MA



Soapstone Quarry, Dana, MA

When a branch of the Boston and Albany Railroad was run from Springfield to Athol through the valley in the 1870's, the area became a popular destination for summer visitors.



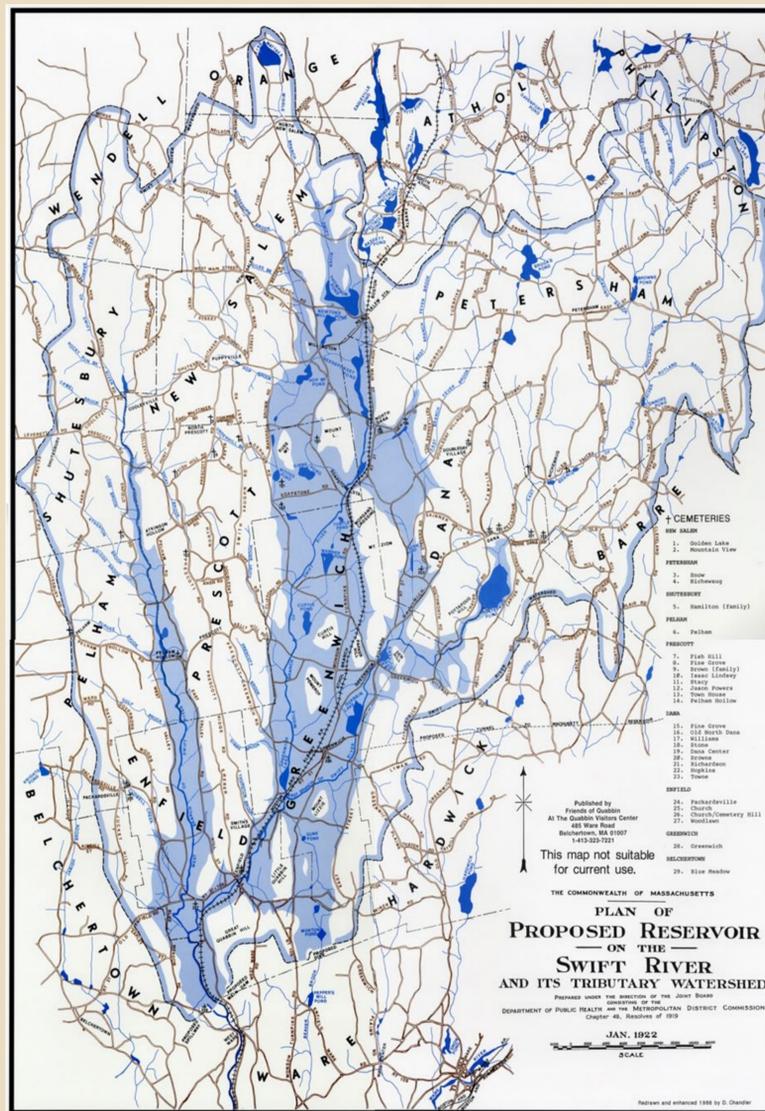
The locals dubbed the train the “Rabbit Run.”



Canoeing Curtis Pond, Greenwich, MA



“Books could be written about fishing and the many stories handed down father to son of the catches yielded by this or that stream...”
Robert V. Johnston, *Letters from Quabbin*, 1938



Map of Quabbin Valley, with the proposed plan for the reservoir, 1922. The Swift River and existing lakes are shown in dark blue. The Swift River Watershed and area of valley estimated to flood are shown in light blue.

Why the Swift River Valley?

Throughout the 19th century, the growing need for drinking water in metropolitan Boston had state officials looking westward into central and western Massachusetts to find or create a source of abundant fresh water. After the completion of the Wachusett Reservoir in 1908 failed to meet the region's long term water needs, officials set their eyes upon the Swift River valley.

Due to the geography of the valley with its low hills and broad lowlands, as well as the high quality of the water, this area had been considered since 1895 as an excellent spot to build a reservoir. By impounding the Swift River and Beaver Brook where they exited the valley, a huge source of fresh water could be created.

In 1927, after years of discussion, the legislature passed the Swift River Act, appropriating money to build a reservoir in the valley. In order to construct the reservoir the valley would have to be cleared of all structures, vegetation and people.

“We had to think about leaving our beautiful valley.”
Norman Lew Thresher, Greenwich, MA



View of Atkinson Hollow, Prescott, MA



View of Greenwich Village, Greenwich, MA (DCR Archives).



View of Enfield Town Hall c. 1890

Although the decision to flood the valley met with some local resistance, the residents had few options and construction of the reservoir began in 1927. Systematically, the Metropolitan District Water Supply Commission (MDWSC), the state agency responsible for the construction of the reservoir, moved to transform the valley. Over the course of 11 years, from 1927 to 1938, the four towns were slowly dismantled and cleared of all people, structures and vegetation.



Prescott School #4 Prescott, MA. Valley schools were closed one by one as families with children moved away.

Other organizations have danced themselves out, to the blare of horns and the thunder of drums; but, it was left for the little children to pronounce the sweet and final benediction on historic Quabbin, once a valley of homes.
Letters from Quabbin
Amy Spink and Mabel Jones



The Thayer House as it was moved from Enfield, MA (DCR Archives).

Homes and factories were purchased from the townspeople, then razed or moved. Large tracts of land were purchased and cleared. The state disinterred 7,613 known graves from the valley and reburied the majority (6,601) at Quabbin Park Cemetery in Ware, MA.

Altogether 80,443 acres of land would be taken for the project and twelve towns affected. Along with the towns completely removed, New Salem, Pelham, Shutesbury, Barre, Petersham, Ware, Belchertown and Hardwick all lost land to the Quabbin Reservoir.



Cemetery Hill, Enfield, MA. 34 known cemeteries were removed from the valley towns (DCR Archives).



The land which was clear cut and burned, leaving behind only former roads, stone walls and cellar holes. (DCR Archives).

At midnight on April 28, 1938, as people at the Farewell Ball listened, the Enfield town bell tolled and Dana, Enfield, Prescott and Greenwich officially ceased to exist. The 2,500 people who had once populated the towns and villages no longer had a place to call home.



Enfield Town Hall c. 1939.

Today Quabbin Reservoir, with Wachusett Reservoir and the Ware River Watershed, are part of a water system managed by the DCR Division of Water Supply Protection and the Massachusetts Water Resource Authority that provides drinking water to 2.2 million residents of Massachusetts. The Quabbin watershed area is a vital resource for the state that would not exist without the sacrifice of the people of the Swift River Valley.

“I find after all these years, there lives within me still some special sense that here, in this sweet water valley, here was home.”

Norman “Pete” Tandy, Dana, MA

Unless otherwise noted, all photos are courtesy of the Swift River Valley Historical Society.

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