

MULLICA RIVER

“When our ancestors came over they were either boat builders, preachers or pirates,” says Don Leek. “Why my grandfather, Charlie Leek, even built some rum runner boats with big liberty engines and bullet proof glass at his boat yard in Lower Bank.”

A history so old the ships and most of the clapboard and cedar shake homes are gone. Stories abound of loyalists, rebels, pirates, and privateers: the terms seem to blend depending on the century. A sleepy brackish body of water, home to plovers, eagles, and falcons. Miles can be traversed with nary a soul in sight. Housing developments, Jetskis whining with riders in fluorescent colored life preservers. Salt marshes near the mouth of Great Bay, upland areas covered with miles of pitch pine. The Mullica River: a paradox if there ever was one.

The Mullica was named after the Swede explorer/settler Eric Palsson Mullica in the late 1600's, who settled at Lower Bank, though whether he lived in a shack or plantation is still up for debate. He is buried in an unmarked grave in an old Lower Bank Cemetery. In 1698 Quaker Daniel Leeds made the first surveys of the area, founding Leeds Point which overlooks Great Bay.

THE MOUTH OF THE MULLICA

Great Bay is covered with a thin sheet of morning fog, evaporating quickly as the sun rises behind us. Our 20' Seacraft outboard skims the surface. Small clapboard cottages built on pilings at Oyster Creek and Motts Creek (pronounced “crick” by locals) are visible above the grasses and bayberry as we head west. Gulls cackle overhead. On this large body of water it is strange that there is not another boat in sight.

Chestnut Neck is located near the mouth of the Mullica River. Today a large boatyard is visible and a few homes along Nacote Creek. (A high, new bridge allows boaters to explore up the Creek). During the time of the Revolutionary War the small village of Chestnut Neck was burned by British invaders in search of Brigadier General the Count Casimir Pulaski's Legion.

Shipbuilding was once a big industry. Large ships sailed the Mullica; commerce was brisk. Imports were brought in from around the world on a flood tide. Exports such as timber, lime, glass, brick, iron and charcoal were loaded aboard ships.

It is easy to think about the early settlers who lived in the area. Were they dashing privateers or just plain everyday folk trying to make the most of the moment? In 1945 Henry Carlton Beck wrote in “Jersey Genesis, The Story Of The Mullica River” that as

“British officers approached the sloping coast of the Jerseys, they were given to understand that Little Egg Harbor and the Mullica were contrived to conceal a ‘nest of rebel pirates’. Natives of the little river towns, British sailors were told, knew their channels and used their ships so well that they struck and slithered to cover like snakes. Jersey daredevils did slip out of Great Bay night after night to capture larger and better armed vessels before their skippers, unfamiliar with treacherous coast and hit-and-run tactics, understood what was happening. Prize craft were captured, convoyed in, unloaded, and tied up at landings from Chest Neck to The Forks by farmer sailors who had been working up to the technique for years. On some occasions as many as thirty armed sloops lay in wait for some hapless, richly laden ship which had been signaled off shore.”

LOWER BANK AND GREEN BANK

Our boat passes under the high Parkway Bridge and we wind our way through the salt marshes of Swan Bay, past historic Clark's landing, and up to the sleepy village of Lower Bank. Salt water begins to turn a bit brown; the pungent brackish smell of the cedar water is an odor we can't mistake. It was at Lower Bank

that the Leek family built boats for generations. Today all that remain are docks in disrepair and empty buildings. A neglected Trumphy is tied up to the Pacemaker Factory. A sign reads "Lower Bank Boat Yard". All is silent except for the sound of our motor. This once thriving town of shipbuilders, a general store, post office, and seven saloons is almost completely deserted.

One can almost visualize old Charlie Leek, a patch over his left eye, telling Henry Carlton Beck that the Leek family has been building boats since the mid 1700's. "With us Leeks it's either been ships or the Gospel. You had to take up one or the other. There was nothin' else." Don Leek smiles at the memory of his grandfather, "He used to build every kind of boat – race boats, pleasure craft and sailboats. He could tweak potential owners by saying that he could build the next boat faster and better." All boats were custom built.

We go under the Lower Bank Bridge. This one has been built in the past twenty-five years; it is not the old turnstile wooden bridge of the past. Small creeks are visible on either side with names such as Bear Creek, Stump Creek, and Cranberry Point Creek. With the ease of an outboard motor we explore a few, backing off when we run out of water. Stands of tall cedars give a fresh, clean scent to the air. An old road seems to lead directly into the water. Did it once go across the Mullica? Was it maybe a ferry landing where settlers could cross with their wagons and cattle? A lone canoer glides by us waving, "This is my morning exercise," she relates.

Green Bank, another old village where three masted schooners were once built and sailed the oceans, is soon visible with some beautifully restored homes lining the bluffs on the northern side. A paper plant, glass works and Aunt Hattie's General Store are things of the past. A steamboat by the name of "Eureka", skippered by Captain Loveland of Tuckerton, was just one of many that regularly commuted from New York to Green Bank.

We pulled up to the northern embankment, tied up the boat, and walked the area. Green Bank Rd. leads to an old church and graveyard, the gift of large landowner Nicholas Sooy, grandson of Eric Mullica's Dutchman friend Joos Sooy. Names such as Sooy, Leek and other pioneers are remembered here. Old farmhouses are tastefully interspersed with newer homes. In "Jersey Genesis" Henry Carlton Beck interviews long time resident, Laura McConaghy, who remembers Green Bank as "sloping bluff banks forever green in the tangle of jasmine, honeysuckle, roses, wild grapes, holly, cedar, and laurel."

The Mullica River – Great Bay area is part of the Jacques Cousteau National Estuarine Research Reserve. It is managed by the Institute of Marine and Coastal Sciences of Rutgers University, located in the old Coast Guard Station at the northern entrance of Great Bay. While the eastern end is home to aquatic vegetation, beds of eel grass, and birds of all types (most often seen during their spring and fall migration along the eastern flyway), the upper parts of the Mullica look like a dense forest. The largest area of pitch pine in North America grows in this area of the Pine Barrens. Luckily for all of us the New Jersey Pinelands Protection Act includes most of the area.

A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

A few housing developments become visible as we approach the Sweetwater area. A Jetskier closely passes us on a narrow bend in the River. "Civilization is upon us," groans one of our crew members. Sweetwater Casino is probably open for lunch, but it is early so we continue slowly along the "no wake" zone heading further into the Pine Barrens. The road from New Gretna to Batsto is visible to our right while homes of all sizes line the Mullica. We motor up to The Forks where the Mullica, The Batsto River and Nescochaque Creek converge.

Once a hub of activity during the Revolution The Forks is now a village of tidy homes nestled in among tall pines and hearty cedars. It may seem amazing today that sailing ships could navigate so far up the Mullica. Sediment of mud and debris has filled the riverbed over the years. Henry Carlton Beck notes that at The Forks "houses and barns and wharves (lined) the shore, and in the river were hundreds of ships, privateers, and their prizes."

Nearby are the old paper plant ruins at Pleasant Mills. Old Charlie Leek described the paper as “Nothing extra. Old fashioned, kind of brown. But it was good enough for what it was used for.” Across small Nesco Lake sits the old Kate Aylesford Mansion. Inspection of another Methodist Church and graveyard yields names of Revolutionary War survivors and their descendents. Nearby Batsto, site of the old mansion, iron works and cannon ball factory, is restored for everyone to admire. But these are trips for another day, by canoe or by car. Our boat doesn’t draw much water, but the river is very shallow in spots.

Back at Sweetwater Casino for lunch we tied up in a transient slip, pile off, and head up to the restaurant. Lunch begins with cold drinks and some of their famous Sweetwater Casino cheese (also sold in the gift shop). Sweetwater is not a casino as in Atlantic City; but a full service restaurant that can handle anything from a few super-hungry boaters in T-shirts and shorts to catering a special wedding in a unique setting. Slips are rented for the season or for just a night or two. Newly renovated bathrooms and showers add to the nice accommodations. Visitors by car can see a bit of the Mullica by taking a ride on “The Sweetwater Lady,” a pontoon boat that tours the river weekends or is available for charter.

A trip up the Mullica River is a study in contrasts: old, new, historical and environmental. Exploring the Great Bay – Mullica River area by boat can take a long time, as there are many creeks to investigate. Going at almost idle speed we could back off whenever our motor hit the muddy bottom. While there was some development, much of the area is preserved for posterity. At turns in the River we never knew whether we were going to see the Jersey Devil or a fast Donzi. Instead we saw wilderness, wildlife, and beauty. One cannot help but be moved by the serenity and wonderment of the area. It is easy to see why early pioneers came to settle the area; and why generations of families have never left.

Old Charlie Leek lived all his life along the Mullica, telling Henry Carlton Beck: “There’s a smell of the Mullica that ain’t like any other smell on earth. Once you get the smell of the Mullica up your nose, all other smells are stinks.” Beck himself agreed, writing in the preface to “Jersey Genesis”: “I may be wrong about the Mullica River. I don’t think I am. To me the Mullica is the most wonderful of the unrecognized rivers of America.”