

The Merrimack River and Newburyport

The Merrimack has been used for many purposes over the years: a conduit for food and transportation for the American Natives, a commercial port in the Colonial town, a protected harbor during the Revolution and a center for privateers and shipbuilders during the War of 1812. It was the source of water that powered the Industrial Revolution, and the place for launching ships for 100 years. The Merrimack gained special importance during the Revolution and the War of 1812 as the base of operations for Newburyport privateers, privately owned vessels licensed to attack enemy shipping.

The Newburyport harbor on the Merrimack River today features a boardwalk lined with gaslight replicas that stretches along the harbor providing a great way to enjoy the river's wonders.

The U.S. Coast Guard was born in Newburyport and has plied the waters of the river, first in revenue cutters that enforced navigation laws. Today they rescue and supervise boats and yachts that have difficulty getting through the "most dangerous river mouth on the East Coast." Three lighthouses erected by the coast guard can be spotted on Water Street and Plum Island.

About Newburyport

The area was originally inhabited by the Pawtucket Indians. The European immigrants who founded Newbury began to settle the area in the 1630's. The small port of Newbury was quickly settled and became a fishing and trading settlement while the rest of Newbury was turning to agricultural pursuits. By 1764, the port was so prosperous and densely populated that it broke off from Newbury to become Newburyport. Maritime trade fueled the city's economy sparking extraordinary building activity in the decades following the Revolution as seen by the large and elegant Federal mansions along High Street. Ships built in Newburyport traveled the world with American goods bringing wealth and prestige to their owners.

Because of its location at the mouth of the Merrimack as it flows into the Atlantic, industries in Newburyport were plentiful in the 18th century, when the city reached its peak as a prospering seaport center. Shipbuilding was one of the most important and profitable trades. Trade was another key occupation. Ships came and went regularly, exchanging their wares from China for fish and rum to the successful downtown merchants. In 1811 the thriving commerce came to a halt when the "great fire" destroyed over 250 buildings and paralyzed its economy.

From this disaster, however, an impressive display of federalist architecture was built from the ground up in brick. Bricks had been the selected building material and were in great supply since they were used as ballast to keep the ships stable when they returned empty of their cargo to Newburyport from abroad. Ironically the 1811 fire led to stringent fire safety building codes which helped in the preservation of the downtown's handsome brick facades.

Following a more recent economic slump, in the 1970's the city launched an extraordinary urban renewal project that transformed Newburyport's decaying downtown and waterfront buildings into the picturesque brick and cobblestone retail center that it is today. Traces of the past abound: clambers' shacks, shipyards, saltbox as well as Victorian houses, Federal mansions and colonial houses.