

# THE HUTCH - A HISTORY OF TAMING A RIVER

by: Joseph Dunnigan

## A River Gets Its Name

Imagine if you will, it's the early 1600s and you gaze out from your new home overlooking the Long Island Sound. Nearby is a trail that passes a rock formation where the boulder has been divided in two and has been aptly named Split Rock. You follow this trail that was established by the Siwanoy People (also called Weckquaesgecks in their own language) who are part of the western band of the greater Wappinger tribe. You come to a flowing river surrounded by large red cedar trees, and you stand at the edge as you watch a great blue heron stalk the waters, schools of alewife fish scatter from your presence, and turtles sunbathe on logs as oysters and mussels sit nestled at the sandy bottom. You are told this river is called *Aquacanounck* in the Munsee language. It is a peaceful place that runs free and harbors so much life, for now.

Over the next hundred years, wars will break out bringing the first wave of deaths to the river's shores. Starting with the Wappinger War, also called Kieft's War, the Lenape and Wappingers fought for their right to these lands against the Dutch West India Company. Just before the start of the war, a Puritan named Anne Hutchinson arrived after fleeing persecution in the Massachusetts Colony. She chose land near the Siwanoy People, and she may have possibly walked the same path we had just imagined and looked out over the river that one day would bear her name.

Anne Hutchinson was a nurse, religious reformer, and tragic victim. She was persecuted for her reformatory beliefs and fled seeking refuge in New Netherland. For a while she found peace in the area called Pelham Bay. This was in 1642.

At the same time, the Dutch West India Company, under the direction of William Kieft, was clashing with the various bands of the Wappinger tribe. The conflict escalated with killings and raids on both sides as the Director increased his pressure in the region. By 1643, an all-out war broke out when about 1500 Lenape soldiers raided New Netherlands. The goal of the Lenape soldiers was to eradicate the land of the Dutch invaders. Unfortunately, settled in the middle of this battlefield landscape was Anne Hutchinson.

The Hutchinsons were killed. Susanna Hutchinson, the daughter of Anne and sole survivor, escaped but was eventually taken captive. Possibly and ironically, Susanna was believed to have used the Native American landmark known as Split Rock as an area of refuge. Afterwards the land that had been the Hutchinson's home was known for a time as "Anne Hoeck," and the river where we had imagined ourselves standing, which had been called *Aquacanounck* and *Eastchester Creek*, was renamed the Hutchinson River.

The Hutchinson River flowed through time as new owners became lords over the land, such as during the reign of the Pells from their Manor at Pelham. The river continued its journey during the American Revolution as new battles brought the blood of patriots, loyalists, and British troops to its shores. And then came the dams.

## Damming a River

The Hutchinson River flowed freely until the late 1800s when it was dammed. In the late 19th century, the Mount Vernon Water Company and the New Rochelle Water Company dammed the river in two places, creating two reservoirs. Afterwards, the river was dammed two more times, creating a total of four reservoirs. The water from these reservoirs was able to flow to the prospective towns using only gravity.

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"I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree...  
And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes  
dropping slow..."

- Excerpt from "*The Lake Isle of Innisfree*"  
by William Butler Yeats

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In the 1930s, the land around Reservoir 1 was beginning to be developed. Developers changed the name of Reservoir 1, and it became known as Lake Innisfree, after the poem "Lake Isle of Innisfree" by William B. Yeats. Lines from "Lake Isle of Innisfree," read, "I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree ... And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow." Yeats wrote the poem while living in a bustling city and remembering his childhood when he had been closer to Mother Earth. Clearly, Yeats was longing for those more peaceful days closer to nature. It is ironic that after the seizure of the natural world by man in the form of a reservoir, the development was named after that same poem.

The reservoirs served Mount Vernon, Tuckahoe, Bronxville, New Rochelle, Pelham, and Eastchester area for a time, but their use was eventually replaced by other means. Now they are mere relics of a period when man began to tame the Hutchinson River. While upsetting to the ecosystem of the Hutchinson, the reservoirs were not the last disturbance to impact the river.

## A Road to Nowhere

The Hutchinson River Parkway, known simply as "the Hutch," was originally conceived by the Westchester County Park Commission. By the late 1920s, the parkway was completed between Pelham and White Plains, enabling a quicker route for local traffic to the county seat. But the Hutch was still disconnected from New York City until a notorious urban planner named Robert Moses came around.

At about the same time as the construction of developments around Lake Innisfree, the parkway along the Hutchinson River was also being eyed by Robert Moses, who was infamously instrumental in creating most of the major infrastructure that flows through and around New York City. But he was most remembered by the people he displaced as a despot of their communities.

Robert Moses conceived a plan to extend the Hutch from Pelham to the Bronx, thus completing the connection of the parkway to New York City and opening the route to millions more travelers. An estimate by the NYC Parks Department states that, "by the 1990s, approximately 110,000 vehicles use the parkway each day." The proximity of the parkway to the Hutchinson River no doubt added tons of pollution to the waters since the time of its construction and extension. Unfortunately, the roadway would not be the only source of pollution to reach the river.

## A Channel of Contamination

The Hutchinson was a river of pristine waters teeming with vast amounts of marine life, such as the alewife (*Alosa pseudoharengus*), a type of fish that would swim upstream to spawn. But because of the dams, alewife have been absent from their ancestral waters, and they are not the only victim.





Contamination has also been a factor in deterring wildlife in and around the Hutchinson River. In fact, according to the organization Environmental Justice Atlas, the Hutch is almost uninhabitable near Mount Vernon due to the high level of pollution. This is corroborated by other sources, such as an article in NY1 by Amy Yensi who quoted an advocate from Save the Sound stating that the rash of fish die offs in the river are likely caused by sewage and polluted waters. It's no wonder that in 2017, a dolphin was found dead in the river after having swum upstream from the Long Island Sound. You may be asking, "Where is all this pollution coming from?"

Besides the pollution from the dozens of industrial buildings that line the river, such as concrete plants and metal scrap yards, plus the effects from the traffic of the parkway and Amtrak, the river has contended with runoff from sewage. According to a monitoring project administered by Save the Sound, it is believed that the sewage begins in the city limits of Mount Vernon where much of the river has such high levels of a bacteria indicative of fecal matter that it is deemed unsafe for human activity. Additionally, NYC has over 400 combined sewer overflows (CSOs), some of which are also affecting the quality of water in the Hutchinson River.

The Hutchinson River is battling so much all at once it seems dizzying to think of all its issues. What are we as Sierra Club members to do about all these problems? Well, fortunately there is an organization devoted to answering that question.

### The Hutchinson River Restoration Project

The Hutchinson River Restoration Project (HRRP) was founded over a decade ago by Eleanor Rae and Toby Lieberman, after Eleanor explored her interest in the life of Anne Hutchinson and the state of the river that bears her name.

HRRP is a non-profit organization that aims to promote the conservation of the Hutchinson River by working with local communities, politicians, and volunteers to restore the river's ecosystem. Their mission is to create a river that can be accessible and enjoyed by all. To accomplish this HRRP organizes many activities around the education and preservation of the Hutchinson River such as clean-ups, river walks, and tabling events.

Currently, the Lower Hudson Group is working closely with HRRP to assist them in reclaiming the land around the river in Mount Vernon to create a more accessible path to the water and help restore the river's ecosystem to its natural state.

Recently, HRRP held a call-for-volunteers event at which they informed the new cohort of participants about the opportunities for supporting their organization. But they still need support. HRRP welcomes the opportunity for you to showcase your unique skills or to develop new ones within their organization. If you would like to learn more about volunteering with HRRP you can visit their website at <https://www.hutchinsonriver.org>.

### Conclusion

It has been over 400 years since the first Europeans set their eyes upon the shores of the Hutchinson River; since then, the waters have been combating centuries of control, pollution, and disturbance. But with organizations like the Hutchinson River Restoration Project, the Hutch may have a fighting chance once again. Evidence that the tide is turning has occurred, such as with the reappearance of alewife in the river. But there is more to do, and it can only be accomplished with the help of the river's most valuable resource, which is your support.



### Candidate Environmental Forum for Westchester Board of Legislators

**September 13, 2023 at 6:00pm**  
**Greenburgh Public Library**  
**300 Tarrytown Road, Elmsford, NY 10523**

Candidates for election to the Westchester County Board of Legislators this November will join us to answer questions about environmental issues. We'll hear from each candidate, and then take questions from the audience.

### HIKES AND OTHER OUTINGS

Don't forget to check the Get Outside page on our group website for all kinds of outings. They're fun and invigorating, and a great way to meet like-minded people of all ages and walks of life.

Visit [SierraLowerHudson.org](http://SierraLowerHudson.org) and click Get Outside.