

## *The Artichoke River: A Taking by Newburyport*

Until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, West Newbury's meadows and hills bordering the Artichoke River not only served centuries-old family farms, but, according to a letter published in the [Newburyport Daily News](#), also offered great beauty, which "depended largely upon the brook which ran for more than a mile through the centre of the farm, and which of course freely watered the pastures and meadows. The long line of willow trees which marked either side of this stream, provided an unfailing supply of fuel, but of even greater value they made a large part of the beauty of the place." In the course of taking land and water in West Newbury, Newburyport's [water commissioners noted "the lament](#) of those who regret the passing of the old landscape as a result of the improvements at the Artichoke, but [thought] that the new lake will more than compensate for what is taken away."

How Newburyport came to sell back to West Newbury wholesale water taken from the Artichoke River in West Newbury (at retail prices) is a book-long story: only an outline fits within space available here. It all began with urbanization and pollution borne of industrialization. In 1851, Massachusetts' legislature granted Newburyport that portion of Newbury bordering West Newbury at the Artichoke, giving West Newbury a new "big city" neighbor to the east. This, said the [Newburyport Herald](#), benefited the newly annexed property owners because the "advantages which [Newburyport] possesses" brought more development.

The city's water issues came to a boil in 1893. In January, the [Newburyport Daily News](#) questioned whether the city's drinking water, then provided by the [privately owned Newburyport Water Company](#), was at fault for an outbreak of "winter cholera" or typhoid fever. By April, [legislative hearings](#) in Boston concerning water supplies for Newburyport were underway. It was discovered that the water company, facing insufficient supply, had been tapping the polluted Merrimack River in addition to local wells, [which themselves were far from pristine](#).

Selectmen in both [Georgetown](#) and West Newbury protested proposals by the city's high-powered advisors (including former [Governor Long](#)) to have Newburyport take their water. [West Newbury Select Board chair Charles Ordway testified](#), "We did not think it a serious subject when this hearing began of the city of Newburyport taking water from the Artichoke River. . . . It is an open river of considerable width. . . . The land is needed by the farmers for use for the feeding of their cattle and it would be bad for them to have it overflowed, also the overflowing of this meadow would stop the drainage of the meadows above, so it would injure the health of the residents of the town." Not much later, in June, 1893, the [state legislature authorized Newburyport to "take](#), by purchase or otherwise, . . . the Artichoke river in West Newbury and Newburyport . . . ." and also to take lands associated with the water system.

Having voted to [acquire the waterworks in 1895](#), Newburyport undertook a [series of studies](#) investigating water sources until in 1908 it settled on the Artichoke River, mostly in West Newbury. Costs were closely evaluated—except those related to taking water and land in West Newbury. Damages in West Newbury were [downplayed](#) with observations that "[t]he city wanted [such a small amount of water that it would be hardly appreciable](#)." Land belonging to the Emery sisters and others was [condemned in March](#) and construction began shortly thereafter. The pumps at Storey Avenue were started up in [July, 1908](#). Meanwhile that year, the legislature had quietly [granted Newburyport more expansive takings authorization](#), among other things empowering it to serve Newbury's water needs.

By 1914 the city was pumping the Artichoke's holding pond at

Storey Avenue dry, in good part because largely unmetered users were [wasting water](#). The city decided to "[build a dam in the upper basin](#) a little east of the Plummer Spring road. . . ." To the consternation of those in Town, more West Newbury land and water was taken in May of 1914, [dam construction was well underway](#) in November, and completed that winter.

In 1916, West Newbury's wealthy Emery sisters offered the Town a \$300,000 gift comprising a library and, said the [Fall River Daily Evening News](#), "[p]rovided that no petty quarrel over its acceptance arises, . . . water mains laid from the Artichoke river . . . through all the principal streets of the town." [A single objection](#) relating to proposed use of a veterans' memorial as a library cost the Town not only free waterworks, but also entitlement to Artichoke waters or at least an opportunity for greater legal clarity concerning water rights.

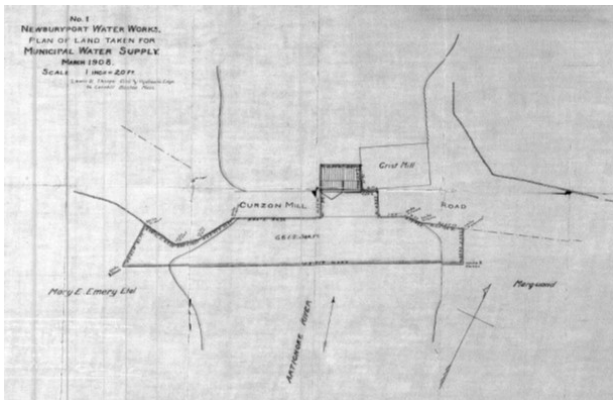
Amidst much dispute, a couple of decades later West Newbury revisited development of its own waterworks. In [1935 the Town voted to issue bonds and use Works Project Administration funding to construct a water system](#) serving Main Street and some other areas. The decision was based on an [understanding among water commissioners in both jurisdictions](#) that West Newbury would buy back Artichoke water at a profit to Newburyport. In 1936 Mayor Andrew "Bossy" Gillis of Newburyport, however, blocked the sale, saying "[he refuse\[d\] flatly](#) to have anything to do with [West Newbury's] water project." West Newbury obtained legislation allowing its purchase of Artichoke water without Gillis' approval, but [Governor Curley, in Gillis' camp, vetoed the bill](#).

And so West Newbury purchased water from Groveland between [1936](#) and [1979](#). A crisis arose in 1979, when Groveland discovered that its wells were contaminated with trichlorethylene, leading to an abrupt shutdown of its—and thus West Newbury's—water supplies that fall. In October, the Town's Water Commission chair Charles Courtemanche told West Newbury town meeting that the polluted water supply, unfit for drinking or cooking, would be "stopping in the next three or four days although I don't know where the water is coming from that will replace it." Days later, an emergency tie-in with Newburyport for the first time allowed West Newbury's water system to access water from the Artichoke—at a price.

Also in 1979, Newburyport was planning a new 150-acre reservoir at West Newbury's Indian and Cherry Hills. Work began in the spring of that year and was completed in September of 1981. Much of the historic Cherry Hill Nursery was inundated; West Newbury's Moulton Street was rerouted. West Newbury hoped that with construction of this 650 million-gallon reservoir entirely within the Town's boundaries, Newburyport would finally grant the Town a committed supply of water. These hopes did not materialize—[and have not to this day](#).

West Newbury thereupon recommitted to finding its own water sources. These efforts culminated in plans to install water wells in Town, to the west of the lower Artichoke Reservoir. Newburyport combated this initiative with a [years-long injunction](#) in the mid-1980s. After this litigation was [dismissed as meritless](#), [West Newbury began sourcing a portion of its water from its own wells](#) in addition to purchases from Newburyport. Notwithstanding, [Newburyport's 2020 climate change plan](#) included as an immediate strategy, "Review West Newbury's current wellfield and any future proposed wellfield expansion Plans for an excessive drawdown, or any other adverse impact, to the city's reservoirs." To this day, West Newbury remains in pursuit of an ample, reliable water supply it can call its own.

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Plan for 1908 taking Essex County Deeds

The water commissioners note the lament of those who regret the passing of the old landscape as a result of the improvements at the Artichoke, but think that the new lake will more than compensate for what is taken away. As to that, we shall be able to see for ourselves next summer, provided it ever rains any more.

[Newburyport Daily News 12/28/1914](#)

# Water!

The condition of our water supply is again alarming. Yesterday with a consumption of 1,290,000 gallons we lost 14 inches from the main pond.

## The Waste of Water Must Stop at Once

Shut off your supply at night, do not allow any to run to waste. Examine your fixtures for leaks, and repair them if any are found.

All must work for the common good until our supply is replenished by heavy rains.

WATER COMMISSIONERS.

[Newburyport Daily News 12/29/1914](#)



Dry Riverbed John S. McGrath collection

*Haverhill Gazette Mar. 31, 1936*

## Mayor Refuses to Sign West Newbury Water Contract

NEWBURYPORT—Although the work on the extension of the West Newbury water system to the Artichoke reservoir has already started, Mayor Andrew J. Gillis yesterday refused to sign the contract for the City of Newburyport to furnish water to its neighboring town.

"We've got to take care of our own citizens before we look out for other towns," the mayor said in giving his reasons for opposing the project. "For St

**FIRST PARISH**

[Haverhill Gazette 3/31/1936](#)

## West Newbury possibly without water by tomorrow

By JUNE COOK  
WEST NEWBURY — Water stopping in the next three or four days although I don't, know where the water is coming from that will replace it."

Based on numerous complaints, he said, the water Commissioners had the water analyzed in late August and discovered high levels of iron, manganese and trichloroethylene. He noted a test run in September on Groveland No. 2 well, which supplies West Newbury, showed 102 parts of TCE per million far above the acceptable level of 25 parts per million.

"As of Friday, October 12, the state ordered the well to be shut down and it was shut down as of 8 p.m.," he said. Groveland, which has contracted to supply West Newbury with water, could not "give any answers and suggested the town seek its own supply "elsewhere."

He said the Water Commissioners have made inquiries to Newburyport. "I can't say as of now," he noted, "if we will be able to make an emergency tie-in with them."

He said the town uses about 175,000 gallons per day and appealed to residents to conserve water immediately.

He estimated that water in the town's standpipe would last until Wednesday. If the town ties into Newburyport, according to Courtemanche, it will take two or three days for the current water to flush from the system.

Selectman Albert E. Elwell reported the well and pump on the Training Field could not be used until selectmen submit plans to the state showing how the well and pump and water would be kept from leaching into it. He said the state wanted a building placed around the pump with a door "that certainly couldn't be locked because everyone in town would need a key to it."

Commenting on the state's requirements, he said the well has been appropriated by the state and he had no way of anyone getting it using it.

Adelaide Janes Clipping Collection, Town Archives



Among those involved in the emergency water connection between West Newbury and Newburyport are, from left, Steve Cushman, Rock Dower (on truck), Dave Jennell, West Newbury Water Supt. John S. Bill and Civil Defense Director Russell Mingo. 10-18-79 (Bill Lade)

Emergency tie-in allowing first use of the Artichoke  
Adelaide Janes Clipping Collection, Town Archives



August 1980: looking toward 5 Moulton Street

John Thawson collection

Construction of Indian Hill Reservoir  
G.A.R. Library Collection