

Dated: January 8, 2021
Revised: January 19, 2021

To: Durham Town Council
Cc: Todd Selig, April Talon, Durham Historic District Commission/Heritage Commission, Durham Conservation Commission, Jennie Berry

As the Durham Town Council weighs the options for the Mill Pond dam, the Durham Historic Association wishes to express its concern that a great deal more is at stake for the people of Durham than the loss of an historic 1913 dam.

As the oldest historical society in New Hampshire the DHA has been a guardian of Durham's history since 1851 and as such it is important to remember the long arc of Durham's history in this area. The site of the natural falls of the Oyster River at the head of the tide and the freshet was the perfect place for Thomas Beard and Valentine Hill to build the first dam on the Oyster River in 1649 by a grant from the selectmen of Dover. Since the earliest settlement of our town to the present day there has always been a dam, a mill pond, and a bridge, surrounded by the homes and the businesses of the community.

Walking or driving through Durham as you cross the Oyster River bridge you see the water from the mill pond flowing over the dam into the Oyster River heading downstream surrounded by the gently sloping land upon which sit new and historic houses. The relationship of these visual elements in the landscape that Durham residents hold dear is what is at stake. Removing the dam results in a dramatic alteration of the river, the elimination of the mill pond, and the loss of the historic landscape that has existed for three hundred and seventy-two years.

The citations below demonstrate all the ways the Mill Pond dam area has been valued and given recognition by the community, the state, and the federal government:

1. The inclusion of the dam and adjacent historic homes in the Durham Historic District certified on the National Register of Historic Places since 1980.
2. The listing of the Mill Pond Dam on the New Hampshire State Register of Historic Places in 2013. NHDHR's "Statement of Significance: The site of Durham's earliest mills dating from 1648, providing waterpower for local industry for 300 years. The existing concrete dam has been in place since 1913. The dam provides the historic impoundment."
3. Six gifts of land and money for the preservation of the Mill Pond, the Dam and the Mill Pond Parks for the benefit of townspeople and the public from generous Durham residents over many years:
 - a) The donation of the dam and other secured rights by Edith Onderdonk prior to 1913 dam construction.
 - b) The Dorothy Wilcox gift of \$67,000.
 - c) The Milne Park parcel on Mill Pond Rd. in 2006.
 - d) The Runlett parcel that is the triangle of town owned land at the north bridge abutment in 1912.
 - e) The Community Church donation of all the land on the north shore of the Mill Pond between 1980 and 1992.
 - f) The La Taille de USA (Dennis Meadows) parcel on the south shore in 2018.

4. The support of the 2013 Town Council Resolution to retain the Mill Pond Dam for the duration of its useful life.
5. The recognition of the scenic and historic prominence of this area on a major gateway into Durham and its cultural significance as described in the Town of Durham Master Plan 2015.
6. The destination status of this area on the Mills Scenic Byways, an official State of New Hampshire Scenic and Cultural Byway.
7. The significance of the dam to New Hampshire history in the essay entitled **New Hampshire's Water Power Legacy** by Dr. James Garvin:
http://www.james-garvin.com/images/Dam_Preservation_Handout2.pdf
8. The status of the Mill Pond Dam as an Engineering Landmark recorded on the New Hampshire Register of Historic Places.

For all of the above reasons the Durham Historic Association opposes the removal of the Mill Pond Dam and urges the Durham Town Council to save the Mill Pond Dam and its environs. We respectfully request that should the Council opt for removal of the dam that the people of Durham have the opportunity to vote on a warrant article deciding the future of the dam.

Respectfully Yours,

The DHA Executive Board:

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