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NEWS

Saw Mill River once a dumping ground for sewage, trash. New Yorkers want it cleaned up



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Key Points

The Saw Mill River runs from Chappaqua to Yonkers in New York's Westchester County.

For decades, the waterway was capped in Yonkers because of how dirty it had been.

The annual Earth Day cleanup seeks to remove debris and refuse in the waterway, but the river still sees sewage waste.

From the dock in Chappaqua, the only sound came from a small waterfall.

The Saw Mill River, originating from an unassuming, unnamed pond surrounded by woods, dribbled over the rocks, expanding into a stream that passed cottages and stone bridges.

About 20 miles south, after the Saw Mill River Parkway — for commuters en route to New York City — followed the freshwater river, the waterway turned west and thrashed underneath Yonkers streets. It first went below a parking lot. Eventually, somehow, it ended at the expanse of the Hudson River.

The Saw Mill cuts across socioeconomic and racial lines that define much of Westchester, from the affluent, mostly white suburban enclave of Chappaqua — home to the Clintons — down to primarily Black and Latino neighborhoods in Yonkers, where the river has been considered a public health crisis. It has been held up as an example of local waterway

pollution for more than 100 years. Now, advocates are driving a renewed push to rid the Saw Mill of waste and sewage.

“Nature doesn’t really know any of those boundaries,” Joel Rodriguez, 46, said as he stood in the Saw Mill during an Earth Day cleanup of the waterway in his hometown of Elmsford, a village about halfway between Yonkers and Chappaqua, on a foggy Saturday morning, on Earth Day.

“We acknowledge these boundaries,” he said. “But we have to break some of those boundaries in order to realize that we’re all part of this river community.”

Rodriguez is the sustainability education program manager at the environmental nonprofit Groundwork Hudson Valley, which had its 14th annual cleanup at various points along the river. About three dozen people joined Elmsford’s cleanup that spanned from the Interstate 287 freeway overhead, to the north, down to Main Street, encompassing a flank of the mostly Latino and Black village that only covers about a square mile.

"We just want to clean up, go check out everything," said volunteer Max Kelly, 9, who sported his new camouflage waders for his second year joining the Elmsford cleanup.

'A flow with odorous sins replete'

On Aug. 28, 1891, the Yonkers Gazette ran a poem, “The Filthy Nepperhan,” a spelling of the Saw Mill River's original Lenape name, which meant “rapid moving stream.” The poem went on to say the river in Yonkers had “A flow with odorous sins replete; / Its nitid bosom has become / A snake-like yellow scrawl of scum.”

The river saw centuries of European settlement beginning in the 1600s to create sawmills and gristmills before the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century brought factories and tenements to the area, Groundwork wrote in a 2019 history to teach students about the waterway.

The Saw Mill River was a dumping ground for sewage and other waste, and dams along the waterway powered mills that created still ponds that spurred public health concerns. As Yonkers grew into an urban center, flooding became an increasingly present possibility.

About a half-mile of the end of the river was covered in a concrete flume under Yonkers in the 1910s and 1920s, according to a 2017 Environmental Protection Agency report. For decades, parking lots sat on top of it near Getty Square, in the city's downtown.

In the 1990s, U.S. Geological Survey research found the Saw Mill had the highest concentration of metals of all sites measured in the agency's National Water-Quality Assessment Program.

New Rochelle air quality studied As New Rochelle grew, Black residents wondered what they were breathing. NY's air quality data will offer clues

How sewage finds its way into the Saw Mill

Twenty-two municipalities in suburban Westchester now pipe their sewage alongside the Saw Mill River watershed for treatment in Yonkers, said Ryan Palmer, the director of the Center for the Urban River at Beczak, or CURB, a Yonkers research center affiliated with Sarah Lawrence College. About two-thirds of the county's waste ends up in Yonkers at its treatment plant. Most sewage lines follow natural waterways, requiring suburbs to push their waste along the Saw Mill. Not all lines are maintained.

“As much as we as a society appreciate water, we’ve also really just not been nice to these rivers for a very long time,” Palmer said at CURB’s water quality monitoring laboratory. “If you look across the country, there’s probably many rivers like the Saw Mill. But it’s really been used and abused for many years, and we’re still seeing it now.”

At the lab, researchers collect samples of river water to surveil for enterococcus, a fecal indicator bacterium that lives in the bellies of warm-blooded animals.

While research is ongoing to determine exact sources of waste through DNA, whether that's derived from humans, birds or dogs, researchers say there is a strong likelihood that readings downstream, in Yonkers, indicate significant sewage leaks into the river. Nearly all points along the river do not meet EPA thresholds for swimming.

Wage theft leaves immigrants vulnerable NY contractor accused of scamming workers. What's being done to prevent wage theft?

'It should be different from the sewer'

Urban historian Steve Duncan has explored cities' waterways, sewers and subways around the world. His work has been featured in the New York Times, Vice and the Discovery Channel. This included the Saw Mill River under Yonkers, where he found remnants of the city's history spanning centuries.

About 15 years ago, he contracted something that set Yonkers apart. He was photographing underground when he fell into the Saw Mill River, puncturing his right hand on an unknown object.

He was in the hospital for a week as his hand swelled to the the size of a football, he recalled. Culture samples from the wound yielded three bacteria, including one "most likely from fecal contamination," he added, which he believes originated from his time in the Saw Mill.

In older European cities, he found old rivers weren't all contaminated. Some were even known to be relatively clean.

"It should be different from the sewer," he said. "And yet, the pathogens in the (Saw Mill River's) water are the same as the dangerous pathogens I would encounter in the sewer."

Public housing residents experience waste, flooding

More recently, the river's most contaminated point, CURB data showed, is at Yonkers' Walsh Road, just upstream from where Duncan entered underground.

In CURB's monitoring between 2015 and 2022, Walsh Road recorded the river's highest bacterial levels, measured in a geometric mean of 990 colony-forming units — far beyond the EPA threshold of 30 — per 100 milliliters of water. By contrast, the furthest north recording, at a duckpond in Chappaqua, had a mean of 101 units.

At Walsh Road, the Saw Mill is just across the narrow street from public housing, where most residents are older, disabled and Black or Latino. In recent years, the area floods as the river, which usually sits about eight feet down an embankment, overwhelms its banks and flows up onto the street.

Hector Santiago's mom now lives in the apartments. Growing up nearby, Santiago, 34, a community activist and member of Groundwork Hudson Valley's Climate Safe Yonkers Task Force, never entered the river, which snakes its way through a narrow waterway that's known to have rats crawling in and out.

"Every other spot is just full of debris, and it's not even appealing to the eye," Santiago said as he stood next to old metal fencing on Walsh Road that led down to the river. "It's just a real safety hazard."

In the river water, his daughter once pointed out what turned out to be a sex toy. On a recent Tuesday, a pipe coming from underneath the road had a car tire lodged partially inside. On Earth Day, volunteers found a mattress, a few bikes and even a telephone pole.

"It's not pleasant at all," Azura Sheppard, 48, said at a bench outside the apartments, which looks out to the river. Most residents opt to sit there as opposed to sitting by the river, which is often a site for dumping.

Sheppard pointed to an area about a half-mile downstream with benches and park space. The river there has been daylighted, or unearthed, nearly a century after being covered.

Is daylighting a solution to clean up the Saw Mill?

Beginning in 2011, Groundwork Hudson Valley and the city of Yonkers worked to uncover the Saw Mill River, with three phases now completed. It's been recognized and replicated across the U.S.

Daylighting the Saw Mill River, said Brigitte Griswold, the nonprofit's executive director, provides "a peaceful respite in the midst of an otherwise concrete jungle. That brings all kinds of health benefits."

CURB's enterococcus data suggests it has addressed water quality, said Palmer, the center's director. This could derive from improvements to stormwater and old sewage systems.

Where the Saw Mill has been daylighted, at Yonkers' Van Der Donck Park, the enterococcus geometric mean goes down to 330 units, from 990 at Walsh Road, before readings of 68 and 43 units closer to the Hudson in daylighted sections, CURB data showed.

Native species, such as American eel and muskrats, have returned in Getty Square. Research also indicates daylighting rivers reduces temperatures in urban heat islands, areas that experience hotter temperatures because of more buildings and less green space.

Lower income neighborhoods in Yonkers have documented effects of heat island effect, as USA TODAY Network New York reported. Climate change is expected to exacerbate temperatures here.

There are plans for a fourth phase of daylighting where a parking lot now is. The area — known as Chicken Island, for an actual isle once in the Saw Mill — was the first to be covered around 1917. In an email, city spokesperson Christina Gilmartin said the project is in design phase, with requests for proposals expected in the summer.

As the sun showed Saturday afternoon, Elvina Schullere, 94, stood with other cleanup volunteers on a grated bridge at a dead-end street in Yonkers. They overlooked the Saw Mill River that ran between autobody shops and a bus depot. A regular for the annual cleanup, Schullere scooped her third bag of refuse.

“If people would keep their place clean,” she said, “it would be nice.”

The volunteers stood yards from where the Saw Mill River led underground, eventually to the Chicken Island parking lot. Above ground, a carnival, with roller coasters and a Ferris wheel, made the area more festive on Saturday.

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