



Steamboats and Water Power: In the 1800s, passengers embarking from steamboats on the Norwich waterfront made train connections to points north. Cotton from the south also arrived by boat and was then transformed into finished fabric in water-powered textile mills on the Yantic and Shetucket rivers.

The Historic Norwich Waterfront

In 1684, a public dock was built nearby at the head of the Thames River, where the Yantic and Shetucket rivers converge. As the community grew, the confluence of the three rivers gave shape to Downtown Norwich—the city’s nucleus today and for much of its history. Norwich developed as a natural trading center and the gateway to the interior of eastern Connecticut. Norwich Harbor became a deep-water seaport, linked to commerce with Europe and the West Indies. Before bridges were built, Norwich was the crossroads of eastern Connecticut — the first place north of the Thames River mouth where the river could be crossed by horse and carriage.

By 1756, Norwich was the second most populated city in Connecticut; its growth and prosperity due to the maritime trade. The banks of the Thames provided an abundance of timber, and many merchant vessels were built in Norwich shipyards along with whaling ships and, later, steamboats. Steamboat service to New York began in 1817. When

railroads converged on the city from all directions in the mid-1800s, Norwich combined maritime, rail and overland transportation systems into a major center of commercial activity. This was a grand era when the city was dominant in the economic, social and political life of Connecticut.

Norwich waterways also powered industry. Great mills were built on the Shetucket, and vast industrial works that manufactured textiles and other goods dominated the city’s economy into the 1900s as maritime trade declined. During this time, the rivers were used for disposal of industrial and human waste. The waterfront was seldom thought of as a source of recreation or pleasure. After World War II the mills closed and the industrial base crumpled, with profound impacts on the city and southeastern Connecticut. Today, the unmatched natural beauty and resources of the harbor and three rivers endures and continues to hold the key to the city’s future.

1859 image of Norwich Harbor: Courtesy of Judge Charles K. Norris

Factory image: Courtesy of the Slater Memorial Museum

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