

Town of Greenburgh
TOWN HISTORIANS
SURVEY MONKEY COORDINATORS



— felicia barber + riley wentzler —

*Elmsford VS. Mother Nature: The
Trials & Tribulations of Babbitt Court*

By: Riley Wentzler & Felicia Barber

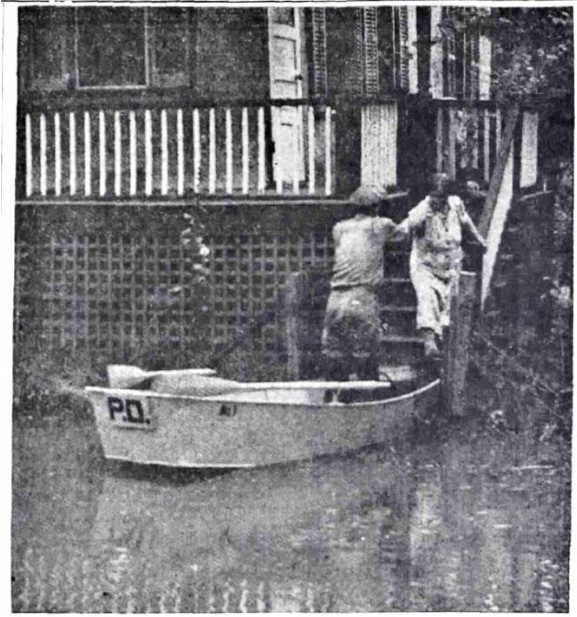


Introduction:

Almost every culture: Aztec, Buddhist, Chinese, Christian, Greek, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, Norse Culture which is commonly referred to as, “Viking Culture,” etc has an account of a great flood. While the details differ greatly as to who or what caused the flood, how long the flood lasted, and how those who survived accomplished this feat, there is one constant throughout them all. This flood killed almost all life on the planet and greatly changed the shape of the natural landscape. The universality of this story speaks to the destructive power not only of this particular flood, but, also of floods in general. Therefore, if at all possible, flooding should be prevented. When it comes to flooding in Westchester County, New York, some areas are hit harder and more frequently than others. Why is that? Ancient cultures with little understanding of science would say because God/the gods is/are particularly displeased with the people living in those areas. But, the truth is more complicated and, yet also, more reassuring, than this supernatural/metaphysical explanation. The true explanation is more reassuring because it has less to do with the wrath of whatever deity one believes in, and more to do with bad planning on the part of human beings. Since we as humans caused the problem, we can correct it.

A More Down to Earth Explanation:

In 1976, Hurricane Belle hit Westchester. The most flooded areas were: New Rochelle, Mamaroneck, Larchmont, Harrison, Port Chester, Eastchester (Hauser 1976 p. A3) and the Babbitt Court section of Greenburgh’s Village of Elmsford (Norris 1976 p. A3).



ELMSFORD POLICE WERE KEPT busy yesterday rescuing residents from inundated sections of the township. Here a rescue worker assists Mrs. Concetti Spadocchia into his rowboat. Constant rains for the past week have flooded all the lowlands of Westchester and converted many creeks into man-sized rivers, flooding parkways and roads. Staff Photo by H. Sarno



Police officers evacuate two women in Elmsford, N.Y.

Flooded Babbitt Court

Do you really think God was mad at all those people? Not likely.

What do all these areas have in common? They are all positioned around the Saw Mill River Parkway. The Saw Mill River Parkway is built along a floodplain. So are the Bronx River Parkway and the Hutchinson River Parkway.

At this point, a rational person would ask, “Why would anyone build a major roadway along a floodplain?” The answer is, “They wouldn’t.”

The Saw Mill River Parkway was **never intended to be a major roadway.**

Although today, on an average day in Westchester, more than 300,000 drivers use the parkways, that was not the original intention. As we said in our previous

article, *On The Road Again: Significant Roads In Greenburgh – Saw Mill River Parkway*, when construction began in 1925 ([http://www.nycroads.com/roads/saw-](http://www.nycroads.com/roads/saw-mill/)

[mill/](http://www.nycroads.com/roads/saw-mill/)), the goal of the Saw Mill River Parkway was to have a medium-low speed road in order to allow for leisurely scenic

drives (<https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/scenichistory.cfm>). Although

construction began in 1925, it wasn’t completed *until* 1954 (<http://www.nycroads.com/roads/saw-mill/>). This is significant because, in the

fifties, there was a population boom in Greenburgh and almost everywhere else in the United States, “The Baby Boom.” As a result of the baby boom, what was

intended to be a **leisurely scenic overlook**, became a **major roadway** not long after its completion. As more people traveled along the Saw Mill River Parkway, more people began to build houses adjacent to it. Which brings us back to where we started: a major roadway, with houses along it, which happens to be built on a floodplain.

During Hurricane Belle, many residents of Babbitt Court had to evacuate their homes. The home of one resident Ron Laino, a Greenburgh police officer, sustained \$25,000 worth of flood damage. Another resident lost many family photos and her wedding dress to the resulting flood (Norris 1976 p. A3).

So, why hasn't anything been done?

It has been difficult to address the problem because of a multiplicity of local governments in the floodplain leading to jurisdictional issues. For example, one can clearly see the problem, if we ignore The Bronx River Parkway and the Hutchinson River Parkway for just a moment, to focus exclusively on the Saw Mill River Parkway. The Saw Mill River begins in **Chappaqua** and then proceeds to flow through: **Pleasantville**, **Sleepy Hollow**, **the unincorporated section of Greenburgh** and then passes through Greenburgh's *incorporated villages of*: **Tarrytown**, **Elmsford**, **Irvington**, **Ardsley**, **Dobbs Ferry**, and, **Hastings-on-Hudson**. When it finally leaves The Town of Greenburgh, it ends in Larkin Park in **The City of Yonkers**. Each one of these areas has its own local government with *very limited* jurisdiction (Shanfelt 1970 p?). As Former County Executive Rob Astorino once said, "Unfortunately, we don't have the money or the power to fix all the problems. But we must work together on regional approaches." To that end, villages like Ardsley, Elmsford, and Hastings all did drainage studies funded by The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and came up with a solution which included: higher levees and walls, bridges being raised higher, and more pumping stations. The Army Corps of Engineers completed a flood mitigation initiative in Ardsley over thirty years ago. But, never took the next steps to address flooding on Babbitt Court and North Elmsford. At one point the federal and state governments felt that the costs would not justify the project.. At that point the Army Corps of Engineers said, it would "cost too much to build to justify its economic benefits" (Groh 1980 p. A1-A4).

All of this, left residents of Babbitt Court with the feeling that the various governments involved were, “All talk, but no action.”

Even when various governments took action, it was often incompetent action which did more harm than good. For example in 1976, the Town of Greenburgh spent 400,000 dollars to install a drainage pipe along Nepperhan Avenue, only to later discover that the pipe was missing a check-valve which caused water to “spurt like a geyser” during heavy rains. Many Babbitt Court residents banded together to sue the town in a \$3.5 million class action lawsuit (Norris 1977 p.11).

We have reproduced the article about the lawsuit below:

Elmsford residents sue over flooding problems

By LYN NORRIS
Staff Writer

Seventeen north Elmsford property owners who claim that flooding problems have been caused by governmental agencies want \$3.5 million in relief and are suing for it.

The plaintiffs all own homes or businesses along the Saw Mill River, where normal rainfall for everyone else translates into instant flood conditions for them.

Greenburgh officials say that the flooding is the result of more water than the river can handle during rainy seasons and that the problem can only be solved through the Army Corps of Engineers flood control project for which Greenburgh and village officials lobbied Wednesday in Washington.

THE PLAINTIFFS contend in their suit that:

- a missing check-valve on a town-installed drainage pipe makes the water "spout like a geyser" into Nepperhan Avenue when heavy rains swell the river above pipe level. The town spent \$40,000 last year to install the pipe which Greenburgh Public Works Commissioner Kevin O'Neill says can handle normal rainfall;

- the town has not cleaned the river. O'Neill said that the town removes obstacles "like old tree stumps or refrigerators" on a complaint basis but that dredging would not help at this point. "The only thing that will give those people relief is the Corps project," said O'Neill;

- a natural ponding area at 89 South Saw Mill River Road, commonly known as the "tree stump dump," became a "mountain"

through dumping and in effect pushes water back into the industrial portions of Elmsford. The dump was licensed by the county;

- the town issued a permit for construction of the Fairview Industrial Park and the adjacent brook was widened to handle runoff from the park. Since the river was not widened all the way down, it created a "funnel" that naturally spills into low-lying areas whenever it rains.

PLAINTIFF Jack Dollinger, who owns a real estate office in the area, said, "There is debris and tires in the river. The tree stump dump acts like a wall for the water and it must come back to us. Then the town spent \$40,000 for a pipe that doesn't work, and now they're going to spend \$3.5 million on this cockamamie stunt (Army Corps project)."

The Carter administration has budgeted \$125,000 for engineering and design work at Elmsford and about \$100,000 for similar work at Ardsley. Ardsley and Greenburgh officials joined Rep. Bruce Caputo Wednesday in testifying before the House Public Works Committee to keep the funds in the Corps budget.

Plaintiffs in the suit include Sunset Taxi for \$1 million and Balport Construction for \$750,000 and 15 others. The suit, alleging negligence and malfeasance, was filed in State Supreme Court against the Village of Elmsford, the town, state, county and East Hudson Parkway Authority and the Elmsford Body Shop (for installing an undersized pipe.)

This all began to change around 2004, when some homes were lifted up. Residents who took advantage of the FEMA grants recognized that it would be very difficult to solve the flooding problem. But, if homes were elevated the homeowners would not lose as much property after a storm. The Town of Greenburgh, working with the village of Elmsford, has also removed obstructions from the river. This has reduced flooding during minor storms, but, has not solved the problem during major storms. Flooding during major storms remains a problem to this day.



If one googles “Babbitt Court Flooding” you can find articles written in 2023.

Conclusion:

When it comes to flooding in Westchester County, New York, some areas are hit harder and more frequently than others because many of the county’s major roadways like: the Saw Mill River Parkway, the Bronx River Parkway, and the Hutchinson River Parkway are built along or on floodplains. Therefore, houses built adjacent to these roads are prone to flood. A multiplicity of local governments in the floodplain have generated much talk resulting in many nice sounding plans being drafted while also making any **real relief** very slow in coming. Some action has been taken, but, it’s really only the first step in a **LONG** process. Flooding of Babbitt Court, for example was a major problem in the 1970s and is still a problem today. If one googles “Babbitt Court Flooding” you can find articles written in 2023.



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- **Forever Resting with The Hudson River School in Greenburgh: Jasper F. Cropsey and his house (1/15/2022)**

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- **From “The Working Man’s Day” to “Summer Isn’t Over Yet”:
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- **Honoring Those who Gave All: Memorial Day in Greenburgh: (5/27/2023) A: Philosopher, Poet, Scientist, and Soldier in Greenburgh: The Extraordinary Life of General François-Jean de**

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- **Being "Old", "Having a History" and Being Historic" What does it all mean?(8/26/2023)**
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- **Civil Rights and the Power of Psychology : Hastings' African-American Power Couple - Kenneth & Mamie Clark (9/30/2023)**
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- **The "Progress" (I mean change) In The Cost of Living in Greenburgh (11/4/2023)**

- [The-Change-in-The-Cost-of-Living \(greenburghny.com\)](http://greenburghny.com)
- **A Historic House with no Peer: The Octagon House 11/9/2023**
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About the Authors:

We are both Town Historians at Greenburgh Town Hall and we are engaged to be married and are currently looking for permanent employment.

Riley Wentzler:

I was born and raised in a small rural town in central Pennsylvania. In high school, I took every honors course available including four years of Spanish. I received A's in all of them. I graduated third in my class of 146 students. This brought me to Edinboro University of Pennsylvania. Once there, I continued my trend of academic excellence. I graduated summa cum laude in Political Science with a minor in Spanish and a Master's in Communication Studies, with a G.P.A of 3.94. It was also there that I met my lovely fiancée, Felicia Barber. My Master's in Communication has promoted public speaking, teamwork, and customer service. My Political Science degree has developed my research skills using computer-based tools and provided me with experience using the Microsoft Office products. My minor in Spanish has facilitated my bilingual capabilities. During my internship at Greenburgh, I created the petition for the State Roads project using website tools. My diverse education and areas of interest have provided me with a wide range of skills. I look forward to finding a career opportunity in business or government. **To suggest a topic for next week's article, you can contact me at historian@greenburghny.com, or to help me find employment, you can contact me at rjwentzler413@gmail.com.**

Felicia Barber:

I was born in New York City and raised in Hartsdale, New York. I graduated from Ardsley High School. I recently earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Graphic Design at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania. It was here that I met my fiancé, Riley Wentzler. As a result of my academic excellence, I won a scholarship every year. I learned and applied many graphic design skills to projects during my summer internships and at school. I am proficient in using Adobe graphic design applications including Photoshop, Illustrator and InDesign. For my Identity/branding course at Edinboro, I created logos to appear on the tee-shirts of Physical Education majors. For a veteran's upcoming event, I used a typeface to focus the reader to the soldier in the poster. For the State Roads Legislative Campaign project, I created the embedded graphic-photo that accompanied the petition I am looking for a job to utilize my skills as a Graphic Designer in an agency, print shop, company or government **To suggest a topic for next week's article, you can contact me at historian@greenburghny.com. To learn more about my artwork or to help me find employment you can contact me at feliciadbarber@gmail.com.**

Two Interviews with the authors:

<https://riverjournalonline.com/around-town/a-love-of-history-and-each-other/13708/>

<https://wcbs880.radio.com/articles/news/stories-main-street-couple-cerebral-palsy-brings-manytalents-town-greenburgh>

