

Forward, into the Past

Napanoch's Liquid Gold

by John Unverzagt
Town of Wawarsing Historian

(After years of waiting – and not without controversy and finger-pointing – Napanoch is about to realize its own municipal water supply system. Ironically, Napanoch – formerly spelled Napanock – is an Indian word meaning “land overflowed by water.” And it was water – its power and as a mode of transportation – that made Napanoch a world-class center of industry and commerce in the mid-to-late 19th Century. Town Historian John Unverzagt recalls a Napanoch at the forefront of technology and entrepreneurship.)

Let's take a brief look at what water and its power has meant for Napanoch; of course, in this short space, we will not be able to include all the businesses that sprung from the waterpower of the Rondout Creek.

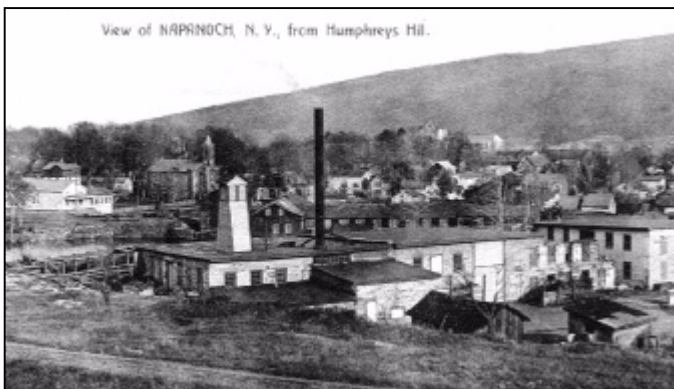
The first mention of man using the water of the Rondout Creek is in the year 1754, when Benjamin Bevier erected a gristmill along the creek to help the farmers in the area grind their grain.

With the opening of the **Delaware & Hudson Canal** in 1828, the Southwick brothers, whose father had settled in Greenfield (now Greenfield Park) in 1814 to run tanneries along the Beerkill, realized the power of the waters of the Rondout. In 1829, they started buying land along the creek at Napanoch and soon owned Bevier's grist mill, and all the water rights, and 500 acres of land at Napanoch.

The Southwicks enlarged the gristmill, and built a flourmill, a very large tannery, and an axe & edge-tool factory along the Rondout. They also built a store and homes for their workers, and laid out the streets in Napanoch. They had two boats on the D & H Canal to ship their products all over the world.

By 1837, Napanoch had grown to be a very attractive and industrious community. The Southwicks, however, lost everything, and many new people came to Napanoch to run the mills and factories.

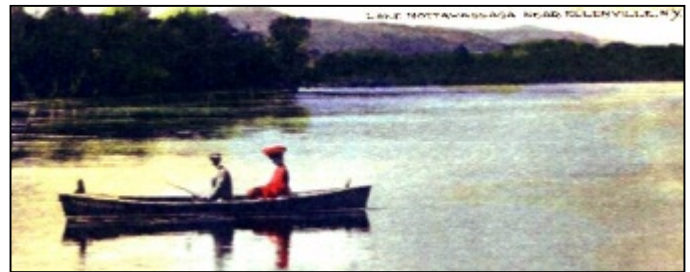
In 1849, Harry Catkamier built a new gristmill on the Rondout, closer to present-day **Route 209**. In 1864, a very important year for Napanoch, Andrew Schoonmaker purchased the Southwick Tannery property on the creek and built a paper mill, which became a very successful business, employing many. Schoonmaker also purchased all the water rights at **Honk Falls**.



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Above, the pulp mill (left), Bevier House (center, still standing), and the ax factory (right) on the Napanoch Stream; below, Lake Nottawassaga (from photos courtesy of John Unverzagt). Bottom left, the paper mill, looking east towards the Reformatory (from photo courtesy of John Adams).



Another new factory to use the waterpower of the Rondout was John Russell's; Russell opened a tobacco-knife & edge-tool factory in 1866. In 1887, Russell purchased 27 acres of land on the south side of the creek to expand his factory. In 1891, the new Ellenville Electric Company rented space in the factory for its generators, which furnished Ellenville's first electricity. Thomas Gray was sent by the Thomas & Huston Electric Company of Boston to install the generators.

In January 1897, upon learning that the electric plant was for sale, Gray returned to Napanoch with his boss, Mr. Dickinson. Seeing Honk Falls, and the water power it represented, he purchased the falls and the land around it. By 1898, the dam and powerhouse were complete and the Ellenville Electric Company started buying their power from the Honk Falls power plant.

Honk (formerly spelled Hunk) is an Indian word meaning “falling water.” The lake behind the dam was named Nottawassaga. Today, the view of the falls still retains its wild beauty, unchanged by man, even as the water power it provided changed our community forever.

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