

A Kayakers' Guide to the Mystic River & Its History

This Guide is for anyone on the river who wonders about those who have traveled here before them and worked and lived along its banks. Imagine the passages of American Indians in their canoes, colonial settlers and traders in their small boats, ferrymen, fishermen, shipbuilders, and sailors and captains on their ships.

Although the river is only six miles long, between 1784 and 1919 shipbuilders launched more than 1,400 vessels into its waters – from fishing boats and barges to coasting schooners, 24 clipper ships, and 57 steamships – a remarkable output for a small New England region. The largest amount of cargo carried on Mystic-built ships was Texas cotton.

Safety First: Always wear a personal flotation device and do not go out alone. Larger boats cannot always see you so stay to the side or outside the marked channel. Remember: the channel is marked by red buoys on the left when going down the river and “red right returning” when traveling back. Also, bring back everything that you take with you.

Access: Unless indicated, all shore property is privately owned. Walking above the high tide line requires permission of the owner. Public access launching points are marked on the map with an L.

Geography & Ecology: The Mystic River is a tidal estuary with Whitford Brook entering at the head. Brackish marshes along the river provide important habitats for insects, invertebrates, finfish, and shellfish (clams, oysters & scallops) which form the basis of the food chain supporting larger fish, birds, and mammals. Canada geese, egrets, herons, osprey, rails, swans and a variety of ducks and shorebirds can often be seen.

Historical Sites & River Access Locations

Upper River

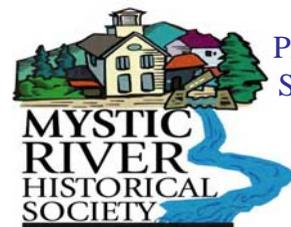
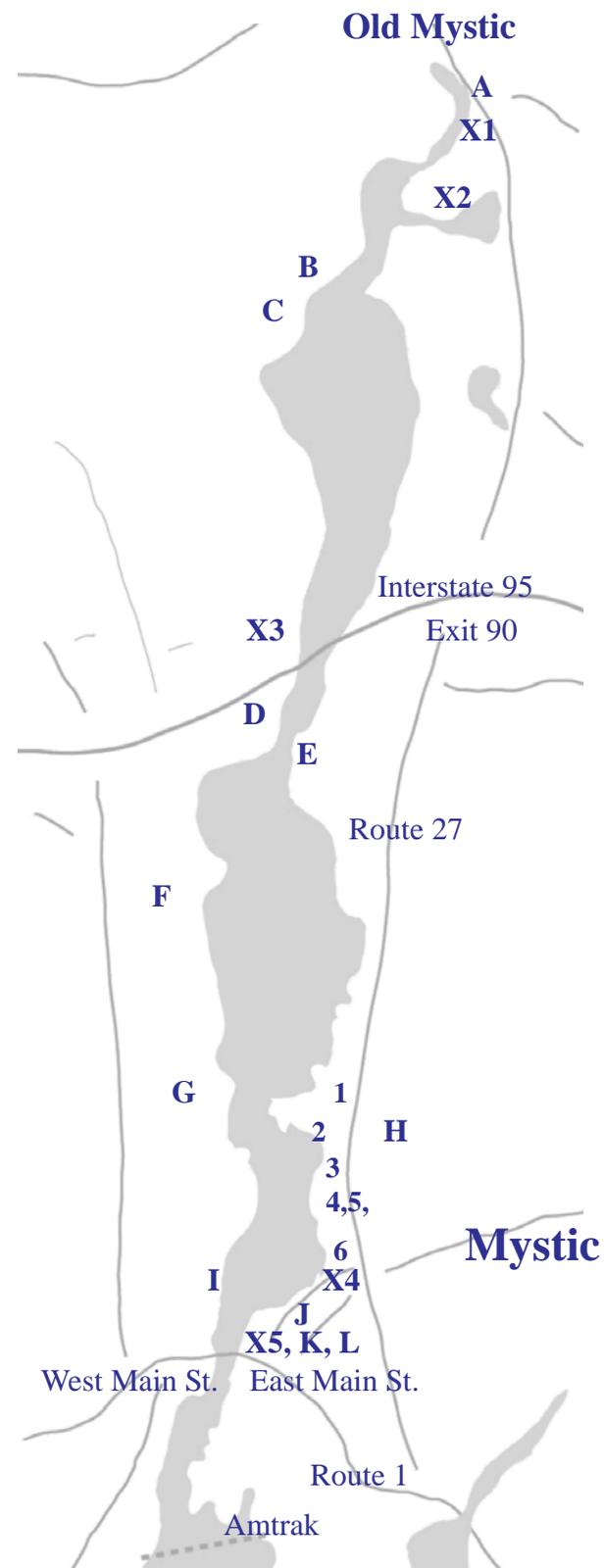
The west side of the river is the Town of Groton, the east side is the Town of Stonington. Old Mystic was called Mystic (and before that Head of the River) until the late 1890's when the name Mystic was transferred, by the Post Office, down-river to combine Mystic Bridge on the east and Mystic River (formerly Portersville) on the west.

A - The brick mill building was constructed in 1943 by Sirtex Printing. The Mystic Manufacturing Company produced cotton and woolen goods on this site from 1850 until the mill burned down in 1920.

X1 - Public Access on Mill Street.

X2 - Public Access at Admiralty Cove is being developed.

UPPER RIVER



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B - The Downes Marsh, owned by the Avalonia Conservancy, is home to nesting ospreys. Do not land.

C - State of Connecticut marsh. Do not land.

X3 - A Public boat launch at 550 River Road is just north of Interstate 95.

D - The Narrows. In 1660 Robert Burrows was appointed by the General Court to operate a small ferry here to cross the river.

E - Elm Grove Cemetery was dedicated in 1854. This park-like cemetery mimics the shape of an elm tree's broad trunk and vase-like spreading branches.

F - The Bindloss Preserve, owned by the Avalonia Land Conservancy, protects a small freshwater wetland complex, including a red maple swamp, a small marsh, and a brook that flows into the Mystic River estuary. Areas such as this, where fresh and saltwater meet, are especially biologically productive.

G - The Peace Sanctuary is a 30 acre parcel owned by the Mary Jobe Akeley Trust, and managed by the Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center. The Connecticut Peace Society held meetings in the Mystic area from 1868 to 1897. Mary L. Jobe ran a summer camp for young ladies there from 1916 to 1930.

H - The Mystic Seaport, The Museum of America and the Sea, now occupies land where three Greenman brothers founded the George Greenman & Co. (Shipyard) in 1837. Many ships were launched here at Adams Point over the years

Across Route 27 are the brick buildings of the Rossie Velvet Company mill which operated from 1897 until 1937.

From North to South ships along the shore are:

- 1 Charles W. Morgan (1841 113' whaling bark)
- 2 Joseph Conrad (1882 111' bark)
- 3 Brilliant (1932 61' schooner)
- 4 Sabino (1908 56' passenger steamboat)
- 5 LA Dunton (1921 123' fishing schooner)
- 6 Lift Dock

X4 - Public boat launch at the corner of Holmes Street and Isham Street. See the sign at the ramp for directions to the parking lot.

I - On the west side of the river, many of the houses along Gravel Street were built by sea captains in the mid-1850's when the village was active with ship building and many auxiliary activities.

J - Bay Street - Site of the Charles Mallory & Co. (Shipyard).

X5 - Public access dinghy dock for visiting boaters.

K - Jail House Point was once the location of the town jail and then a Community Center which started as the Cosmopolitan Club in 1911.

L - The Lathrop Marine Engine Company was located in the long wooden building (built 1898) on the river and the red brick one-story building (built 1907) across the street. Lathrop engines were known throughout the world for their reliability.

Upper River continued

A - Today's bascule bridge was built in 1921. The counter-weights, which are filled with concrete, sit high above the roadbed instead of in the usual place beneath the bridge because the roadbed is not much higher than the river.

In 1819, the Mystic Bridge Company built a wooden swing toll bridge here. This bridge was later converted to a drawbridge powered by oxen to accommodate the shipyards up-river. In 1865, a turntable bridge was built by the towns of Groton and Stonington. In 1904, the bridge was modified to allow for the weight and tracks of the trolleys that were new in town.

Beware of dangling fishing lines when passing under the bridge.

B - The Mystic River Park is on the location of the J.O. Cottrell Company, established in the 1830s. It is believed to have been the oldest lumber company in Connecticut and the second oldest in New England. The main building remains at the south end of the park. Mr. Cottrell's home across the street still stands, as does a warehouse building.

X6 - A public floating dinghy dock at the south end of the park.

C - Packer's Ferry ran from the foot of Old New London Road across the river to Pistol Point after 1769.

D - The tall brick building originally was the power house, car barn and round house for the Stonington Groton Trolley Car Company. The trolley line ran down from Pawcatuck to the Thames River.

E - The Mystic Art Center was built in 1931. It is the home of an active group of artists and members.

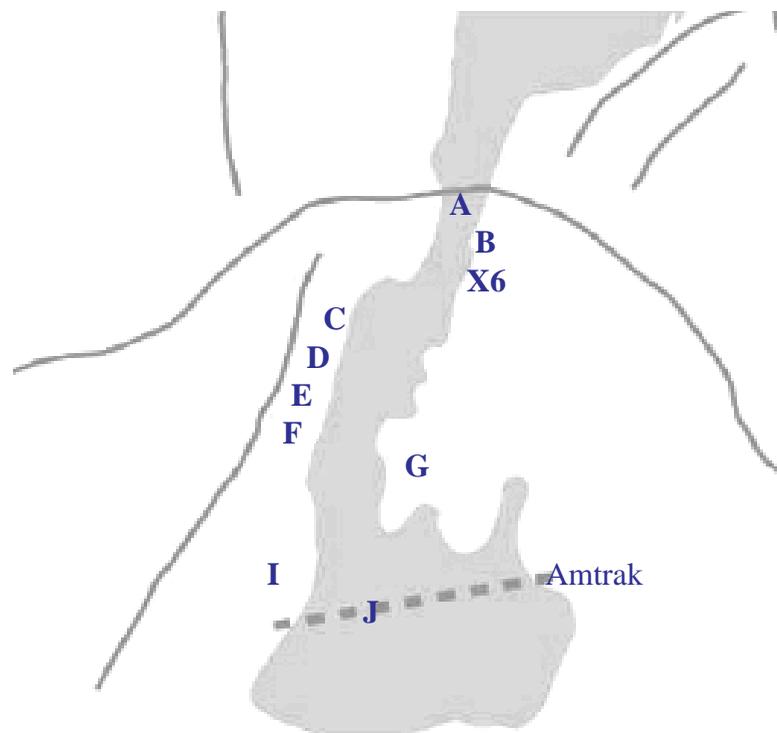
F - The small dock on Water Street is a Town of Groton public dock.

G - Pistol Point was the location of the Oceanic Woolen Mill and the Mystic Iron Works. Both businesses were burned to the ground during a fire in 1875. The Irons & Grinnell shipyard was also on this point. They built ships that were used in the cotton trade during the mid 1800s. The most famous ship built there was the *Andrew Jackson*, the ship that was commanded by Capt. John E. (Kicking Jack) Williams, who lived on Gravel Street. This ship set the record from New York City to San Francisco in 89 days and 4 hours during the winter of 1859-60.

I - Fort Rachel. During the War of 1812, Mystic men kept the British from coming up the Mystic River with a fort and a 4# cannon on top of this rock ledge. According to legend, a woman named "Rachel" lived below the fort and gave comfort and nourishment to the men when they were on watch. The lower Mystic River was referred to by the British as a "hornet's nest" because of the local men harassing their ships that were blockading the river.

J - The railroad bridge is on the Amtrak main line between Boston and New York. The original bridge was built in 1858 and replaced in the 1880's. The present bridge is a replica of the bridge built in 1919.

UPPER RIVER continued



LOWER RIVER



Lower River

X7 - Williams Beach at the YMCA off Masons Island Road.

K - Willow Point site of the Maxson, Fish & Co. (Shipyard). The Union's second ironclad ship, *Galena*, was launched here on Valentine's Day 1862. The nearby Willow Point Casino was a popular dancing destination from 1915 until 1931.

L - Pine Hill on the northern end of Masons Island along the river originally was a hill of granite. Trap rock and large stone were loaded from a quarry here onto barges for use up and down the coast, including the Stonington and Nantucket breakwaters.

M - The present Ridingway Bridge was built in the 1930's.

Sixpenny Island - Owned by Penn Central, the State of Connecticut and others.

N - Beebe Cove is accessible through the railroad bridges.

X8 - Public access is available at Spicer Park on Spicer Avenue off Elm Street.

O - The tip of Ram Point is owned by the Avalonia Land Trust. Inside the point is the Great Marsh which is under a conservation easement given to The Nature Conservancy. Do not land on the marsh.

Noank Village - Inhabited for many years by fishermen, lobstermen, and shipbuilders and their families. The fishing fleet was almost wiped out by the Great Hurricane of 1938. The white steeple is the Baptist Church built in 1843 and rebuilt in 1962 after a fire.

X9 - Town Dock at the foot of Main Street. The Chester Latham Store here is owned by the Noank Historical Society.

Q - The Noank Oyster Cooperative raises oyster seed for distribution to oyster growers around Long Island Sound. They also conduct an aquaculture business growing shellfish in the river. The building originally was a State of Connecticut lobster hatchery.

Morgan Point - Site of Palmer's Morgan Point Shipyard which was the largest wooden ship builder in Connecticut in the 1880's. Morgan Point Light was built in 1868 and discontinued in 1919.

Ram Island - South of Masons Island and is private. From about 1850 there was a large hotel here. Customers arrived by majestic Sound steamers and ferry boats from Noank and other places. The building was razed in 1921. After that the island was owned by Mary Jobe who brought the young ladies down the river from her Camp Mystic for swimming and chowder.

Ahoy and Quirk Islands were named by Arthur Henry who built a house on Quirk in the late 1800s.

Gates Island - Washed clean of a small cottage in the Great Hurricane of 1938.

Enders Island - Home of St. Edmund's Retreat, a haven of nautical peace and Catholic prayer.

The **Connecticut DEP Coastal Access Guide** is available at www.lisrc.uconn.edu/costalaccess/ There are several Sites under Mystic.