



<http://www.cumauriceriver.org>

River Diking By Jane Galetto

Today when you travel the tidal Maurice River, the most striking feature is the expansive marshlands which border the main channel. In the freshwater section the predominant vegetation is the wild rice and the broad leaves of arrow arum. As one moves further south and the water becomes saltier, the large stands of spartina alterniflora cover the expansive marsh plain.

But this was not always the case. In fact for many years the river was diked and farmed. So what you would have seen from the late sixteen hundreds until the nineteen fifties was a vastly different landscape. There were cattle farms, subsistence farms, orchards, and rows of crops. In the more saline areas salt hay was king. The salt hay market declined in the 1920s when glass companies began using corrugated board for packing glass although there was still some demand for the product for a multitude of purposes such as suppressing weeds, insulating crops from frost and freshly poured concrete, and even stuffing casket mattresses. During the 1960s Cumberland and Cape May Counties were still farming salt hay. Today, only a few remnant farms remain. Most of the Delaware Bayshore farms are once again flowed by the tide, allowing the marshes to act as a nursery for fish just as nature intended.

Our first farmers were the Lenape Indians who girdled trees and burned underbrush in order to plant crops. But colonists brought farming techniques familiar to their respective homelands. The Dutch and the Swedes were used to dike farms and had a marked effect on the riverscape.

Treelines in the floodplain usually denote the remains of a diked area. In fact if you contrast the Menatico and Manumuskin rivers, the difference is quite evident. Along the Menatico these treelines are prevalent. However, the Manumuskin at one time employed sluice gates near what is now the Route 47 crossing; these kept the tide from reaching areas upstream. Thus the river was essentially undiked, so the views today are more indicative of a natural setting.

By the 1780's diking and ditching were a very organized practice governed by the New Jersey Board of Agriculture with committeemen being appointed to ensure that dams, floodgates, banks, and sluice gates were in proper working order. Farmers owning

large expanses of marsh collectively hired meadow companies to do the maintenance. The attraction to farming these marshes was the fertile soils which they contained. Water also allowed quick access to transportation. But as upland farming practices were enhanced by fertilizers and road access improved, these diked farms went out of favor. By the 1950s most of the dikes were all but gone. Dikes fell into disrepair; today one of the few such farms remaining is the Burcham Farm in Millville, New Jersey.

So the next time you travel the Maurice take a moment to envision a river a-bustle with wagons, plows, cattle, ferries, shallow-draft scows, and many rows of crops. And think of the important role this played in the founding and development of our area.