

# Head of Falls

## Some History

This property is one of Waterville's most historic locations – both for the Native Americans and the European settlers. The area was known by its early inhabitants as Teconnet Falls (later Ticonic Falls). It acquired the name from the Native American Chief Teconnet who was the leader of the Canibas tribe of the Wabanaki people – the natives who peopled this stretch of the Kennebec River.



The Canibas people created a village at the confluence of the Sebasticook and Kennebec Rivers which was estimated to be the second largest Native American settlement in Maine at the time of the first European visitors.

The village, known as Teconnet, was not only an important trading center, but also a stop on the journey for prisoners of war (French & Indian conflicts) until it was burned in 1692 thus ending the Canibas tribe's ancestral home.

With the village on the eastern (Winslow) shore of the Kennebec, the Canibas burial ground was on the western (Waterville) side stretching from modern day Temple Street to the Lockwood/Hathaway mill complex.

Soon after the early visitors finally established their presence here, it became clear that this stretch of the Kennebec presented some very important characteristics for commercial activity. We know that the early settlers established their water-powered mills on the western shore below Ticonic falls, and we also know that the Head of Falls area was used for heavy manufacturing when the Waterville Iron Works was built there in 1896. This operation began as a foundry and machinery business – particularly for the pulp and paper mills. It carried on well in to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was eventually joined on the site by the Riverview Worsted company (later Wyandotte Worsted) – a woolen mill that operated at Head of Falls from the early part of the century until the late



*Head of Falls • circa 1906*

1960's. Residential structures were also built in and around this area to provide workers with easy access to these businesses and to the Scott Paper mill across the river in Winslow.

A pedestrian foot bridge was constructed in 1901 to provide nearby workers with easy access to both sides of the river. It was washed away in 1902 but a replacement was soon completed a year later. The bridge is still there today and stands as the last surviving toll footbridge in America.



## **Urban Renewal**

By the end of the 1960's, Head of Falls had become the site of a tired old mill adjacent to a collection of substandard residential dwellings. It was a ripe project for the ambitious Urban Renewal project beginning to shape the greater downtown area.



As part of this initiative, the mill was relocated to the West River Road and suitable replacement housing was arranged for the remaining residents on this property.

After all buildings were razed and the foundations buried, the City, in many ways, turned its back on the river. Sadly, the only public purpose the property served for many years was as a City snow dump. All snow to be removed from the downtown area and other areas throughout the City was deposited there.

Vestiges of the “snow mountain” were often times visible well into June. Debris, litter, etc., also accumulated there as a result of being scooped up with the snow that was relocated to this site.

## **The Lost Decades**

Throughout the 70's, 80's and 90's this prime riverfront area became a no-man's land – a place with enormous potential but an uncertain future.

The Two Cent Bridge continued to stand as a testament to better times – times when Head of Falls served many important purposes in the City's social and economic history. In recognition of its importance to this place, the bridge was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1973.

## A New Century – A Rebirth

As a new century was dawning, City leaders turned their attention back to the riverfront. A comprehensive planning effort began in early 2000 with the formation of a local committee and the employment of a planning firm, a traffic consultant and a landscape architectural company. Extensive community discussion resulted in a Riverfront Master Plan a copy of which may be viewed in the City Manager's Office or online at: <http://tinyurl.com/2001plan>.

The introduction to the Plan made the following statement:

*“Having developed along the Kennebec River, Waterville slowly turned its' back on the river as the economic use of the waterway declined. After removing blighted residential and commercial activities along the river, the waterfront now lies open and fallow, awaiting the opportunity to once again become a focal point of the community.”*

As a result of the planning effort, the City took the following steps to spark improvements at Head of Falls:



- **2003-04: Infrastructure** – The City applied for and received a Municipal Infrastructure Trust Fund grant from the State in the amount of \$500,000 to install water, sewer and electric utilities to develop lots at Head of Falls for office/commercial purposes.

The City borrowed \$1.25 million as the required match to complete this project. In addition to an extensive network of water, sewer and electric lines, a parking area was also developed. Work was completed in 2005-06. This project was completed under budget so the remaining bond money was used to finance some of the projects listed below.

- **2004-05: Request for Gateway Building** – The City issued this request in May 2004 looking for a developer to build a professional office building near the entrance to the property with the hope that this would spur other investments. There were only two (2) firms interviewed and neither one was judged to be prepared to proceed with this investment.
- **2006: Request for Development Proposals** – The City issued an invitation to firms for development of the Head of Falls property. This request was not limited to any particular use noting that proposals would be evaluated “...in the mix and quality of uses proposed for development.”

The City received three (3) responses, but all three (3) proposed housing as the preferred development. At this time, the City and the Waterville

Development Corporation (WDC) did not want to see housing only as the priority use for the property.

- 2008-09: **Market Analysis** – The City conducted a Market analysis of the Head of Falls property with the assistance of the marketing firm of Bartram and Cochran of Farmington, CT. The purpose of the study was to “...assist the City and the WDC in the marketing and development of a riverfront section of the City.” An analysis of the rental, office, commercial and public use and residential sectors was performed. This study was completed in December 2009 at a cost of \$22,000. The study’s primary recommendation was “...for mixed use development combining restaurants, retail/shopping, commercial uses, office space, residential, open space/public gathering locations and public/private event uses.”
- 2009-10: **Snow Dump** – Although it took almost two (2) years to complete, the relocation of the City’s snow dump was an important step in making Head of Falls more user-friendly. The City worked with the railroad to secure a new site adjacent to their property and upstream from Head of Falls. Total cost to build a new site was approximately \$282,000.
- 2010: **Development Agreement** – The City signed an agreement with the Waterville Development Corporation authorizing WDC to “act as its agent for the marketing, sale and development of the Head of Falls property.”
- 2010: **Two Cent Plaza** – The City hired a landscape design firm as part of a proposal to create a plaza leading to the Two Cent Bridge. The City received a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) award in the amount of \$210,000 and contributed about \$100,000 to complete this work. Some of this money came from the 2004-05 bond issue.



- 2010-11: **Two Cent Bridge Repairs** – Using remaining bond finds and securing a \$400,000 grant from the Maine Department of Transportation, extensive work was completed on this historic footbridge in 2011. Total cost was approximately \$570,000 and included the following work:
  - Wind Cable Replacement

- Handrail replacement on the Waterville and Winslow approaches
- Replacement of main bridge handrails
- Replacement of the Waterville and Winslow approach grating
- Raised Waterville approach span by 3 feet and rebuilt foundation to allow ADA access.



- 2011: **Request for Letters of Intent** – In September, 2011, the City ran an advertisement in four (4) state-wide newspapers and the Boston Globe requesting proposals that “...coincide with and support the City’s stated goal for the Head of Falls property.”

In addition, an email invitation was sent to 21 selected firms that may have had an interest in this development proposal.

The City did not receive any responses to this initiative.

### **Proposed RiverWalk**

The City continues to promote the revitalization of this underused and prime riverside location. In August, 2015, the Waterville Rotary Club announced that it will celebrate its Centennial Anniversary with a Grant of \$150,000 for the Kennebec RiverWalk at Head of Falls project! This innovative project, a collaboration between



the City of Waterville and the Kennebec Messalonskee Trails organization, is designed to encourage greater public use of the waterfront area at Head of Falls for recreation and other community purposes. More information about this project can be found on our [website](#) by searching “RiverWalk.”

This snapshot summary of activities at Head of Falls has been prepared to provide a background for understanding how we may go further with a bold, new vision for the City’s most valuable waterfront property.

Waterville is indeed fortunate to have such a valuable public asset and we must thoughtfully examine all proposals for future uses. We are hopeful that Head of Falls will return to play as significant a role in Waterville’s future as it once did.