

The Power of Water



LaChute Riverwalk
Number 1 of 12

The waters of Lake George falling over Bicentennial Falls today form a pretty backdrop for Bicentennial Park. For more than two hundred years this waterfall also produced power. Beginning with a French sawmill in 1756, soldiers, later followed by settlers, harnessed flowing water here and at a dozen other sites along the River. Throughout the 19th century, saw mills, pulp and paper mills, iron forges and furnaces, and woolen, cotton and graphite mills competed for use of the water. Eventually, pulp and paper making dominated the riverfront. By the middle of the 20th century, International Paper Company controlled nearly all the power generated at six different dams.

When International Paper moved the Ticonderoga Mill to the shore of Lake Champlain in 1971, they demolished everything except the “1888 Building,”

now home to the Ticonderoga Heritage Museum. Townspeople launched a concerted effort to reclaim the abandoned site as a park. Volunteers drove the bulldozer, planted trees and worked with the Youth Conservation Corps to transform the old railroad trestle into a covered bridge. Once again, the falling water has the power to attract people to the riverside.

The mills may be gone, but the waterpower still works. A small-scale hydroelectric plant nestled discretely under the waterfall generates electricity. LaChute Hydro draws water from two upper dams to generate electricity whenever the river flow is high enough. By agreement with the Town, the generating station always leaves enough water in the River to produce the cascade you see.



This sketch of “Ticonderoga Creek” made by Sir Henry Barnard in 1838 offers the earliest view of the working river. The debris in the water testifies to the saw milling activity upstream. This sketch and photograph (above) courtesy of the Ticonderoga Historical Society.



The Ticonderoga Pulp and Paper Company “lower mill,” built in 1883 (above), replaced the original 1878 mill. The Victor wheel (left) installed in 1898 delivered 565 horsepower under the “head” (height of water) of 32 feet. Outlets for the penstock feeding the 39” wheel are still visible next to the hydro plant. Courtesy of the Ticonderoga Historical Society.



A thriving town grew up around the diverse industries powered by the LaChute River. In the course of two miles, the River falls 220 feet from Lake George to Lake Champlain, offering a greater drop than Niagara Falls. The width of the River has been filled considerably since William R. Miller drew this view for the May, 1854 issue of Gleason’s Pictorial Magazine. Courtesy of a private collection.