

# Local historian builds case for mill pond's significance

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**SANDWICH** - History could be on the side of fixing the Upper Shawme Dam.

John Cullity, local historian and member of the Sandwich community preservation committee, is helping the town build a case to spend Community Preservation Act funds on the dam because it was used to power a cotton mill during the War of 1812.

The dam is considered a "significant hazard," which means its failure could cause "loss of life and damage to homes" in the town's historic village. In light of recent flooding in the Merrimack Valley and North Shore, officials feel the urgency to get it fixed.

In total, the dam project would cost nearly \$800,000, but the town has received a state grant for about half of that. An attempt to get taxpayers to pay the

\$400,000 through a temporary tax, or capital exclusion, failed at the polls May 4. That would have added \$38 to the bill of a property valued at \$412,000 - the town's median price.

By law, community preservation funds, which come from a 3 percent property tax surcharge and matching state funds, have to be spent on historic preservation, open space and affordable housing.

The town had a little more than \$1 million in CPA funds to spend this year, all of it divided at town meeting. A new infusion of cash is expected after July 1, the start of the new fiscal year.

Just what constitutes historic preservation is up for interpretation by the local committee, town meeting and, ultimately, the state Department of Revenue. There is no precedent for spending money on a dam, but the law does give local communities latitude on how to spend the money, said CPA committee chairman Robert Hoxie.

At least 10 percent of community preservation funds must be spent on historical preservation and both Cullity and Hoxie say a case can be made for the mill pond's historical significance.

In 1811, a U.S. embargo of cotton from England provided Samuel Wing with an opportunity to meet the new demand for American-made fabric. The Upper Shawme Dam, an earthen berm, was built to funnel the water to his cotton mill.



■ John Cullity, a Sandwich historian, hopes to use Community Preservation Act funds to help pay for repairs to the Upper Shawme Dam.  
(Times photo by Paul Blackmore)



"The mill pond and the use of water power is what is historically significant," Cullity said.

Wing has historical credentials as a cabinetmaker, wood turner and craftsman. His tools, account books and workbench were donated to Old Sturbridge Village, a living history museum in Sturbridge, where they are currently in storage. In 1987, they were loaned to Heritage Museums & Gardens, in Sandwich for an exhibit.

Cullity is using his historical knowledge, gleaned from Wing family members and other research, to make a case for using community preservation funds to pay at least part of the \$400,000. Even though the earthen berm would be replaced by a modern dam, it would preserve the historic mill pond that's powered everything from Wing's cotton mill to a factory that made timers for Model Ts, he said. A stone foundation still exists in the woods near the dam.

Town counsel, in a letter to selectmen, expressed skepticism about using community preservation funds for the project, but that was before Cullity and Hoxie made the link to local history and Wing.

The town considered making the case that failing to repair the earthen berm, built between Upper Shawme and Shawme ponds, puts buildings in the town's historic village, including town hall, at risk.

"I'm not comfortable with that," Cullity said. "It would set a dangerous precedent on the use of CPA funds."

But making the case that the dam is historical is something worth exploring, he said. Once Cullity drafts his narrative about the mill history, and Town Administrator George "Bud" Dunham fills out a formal application for the community preservation committee to consider, it will all be resubmitted to the town's attorneys for a second opinion.

Even if town counsel gives a thumbs up, using the funds will require a majority vote of the community preservation committee June 26 and, ultimately, approval of town meeting.

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