

HISTORIOGRAPHER'S REPORT 2018

The communities of Burlington County and the Episcopal Churches in them, are defined by water. In the days before railways and interstates, those riverine connections were the primary means of communication.

Thus along the mighty Delaware, seven of our churches are within blocks of that waterway which was and remains a major thoroughfare for goods and travelers. But there is another stream, much smaller, that connects the interior of Burlington County with The River. This stream is Rancocas Creek and its 60 or so sinewy miles connect another seven of our congregations draining a watershed of 400 square miles. This report may read more like natural history than ecclesiological, but after all, God has been at work in our Diocese for longer than we have been here.

My intimacy with Rancocas Creek began when my wife Anne and I purchased a small get-a-way place with 240 feet of frontage on the stream. By our cabin, Rancocas Creek flows almost perfectly north -- like the Nile. It is only like the great river of Egypt on our stretch, however. Its general flow is east to west, draining the great pineland aquifers into the Delaware. The fresh waters it issues at its mouth fills our taps at our Rectory in Riverton and gives us a river tidal flow without a taste of the sea.

The tendrils of the Creek reach into Ocean and Camden Counties, but the Rancocas is Burlington's boast. She's not the 'Old Man River' of Music Man fame, the 'wide Missouri' or even Vienna's 'Beautiful Blue Danube', but there are charms and miracles along her length.

Her waters are not of the crystal clarity that draw so many to other places. Yet the native inhabitants said its shores were 'the place of many kinsmen' memorializing its attraction to a significant number of those Lenape of the Unami clan. Certainly, these streams provided for them the wild versions of cranberries and blueberries which became the cultivated varieties we now enjoy each summer thanks to the efforts of Elizabeth White.

Elizabeth White of Whitesbog, the patron saint of the Jersey blueberry and one-time treasurer of Grace Church in Pemberton. Rancocas waters had provided the transportation for the Hanover Furnace her grandfather ran, and floated for harvest her father's cranberries. Miss White's foresight and efforts brought about an industry and a gift. Pop a blueberry into your mouth, bite in and roll that flavor on your tongue. Then thank God for Elizabeth White.

Those Rancocas waters, the color of tea, stained by the tannins of the pine needles and cedar fronds that filter the rain that percolate into the sandy soil. Yet there are those who swear to the benefits of soaking in the 'cedar water'. But more concretely, the joining with the iron rich groundwater which leaches up, forms over time the bog iron from which were made colonial kitchen utensils and revolutionary cannon balls. Furnaces blasted through the Civil War, converting the stuff the creek's flow left behind into items still valued today.

When those furnaces went cold, our Rancocas flowed through a moonscape. The trees had been cleared to make charcoal, the soil dug to unearth the iron rocks. It is hard today to envision our creek's watershed looking like a stream of water poured from a bucket into a sandbox. However,

there was the miracle of cranberry, that staple of Thanksgiving. We should give thanksgiving for that modest fruit. Its vines, growing in first succession, covered the lunar landscape, slowly providing the necessary nutrients to the sterile sand so that eventually it again became Pinelands.

Cranberry bogs make their eponymous product easy to harvest, bobbing crimson upon the surface to be scooped. Then Rancocas waters cover the tender crops through our bleak midwinter. But visitors from the north, the tundra swans, find the bogs a relief from the arctic freeze in their Canadian home. They don't eat cranberry plants, but batten on the weeds that surround them under the chill but unfrozen waters. The swan's bodies then convert those weeds to fertilizer which is absorbed through the young plants' dormant foliage. Next Thanksgiving, consider how the young cranberries were cultivated and nourished by swans.

*Jordan's river is chilly and cold, hallelujah
Chills the body but not the soul, hallelujah*

Our Rancocas is also not the Holy Land's Jordan. Nor do Michaels [or Michelles for that matter] do much rowing on her anymore. But cold her waters certainly are. After all, she drains ten percent of the Kirkwood-Cohansey aquifer, year-round temperature 54°. The water is warmer by the time it gets to our cabin, but bathwater it is not. Frankly, it is warmer when there is sufficient rain, which mixes and ameliorates the groundwater chill. When the creek is low, as it is most summers, it is COLD -- COLD even on a hot summer's day. It chills the body and causes me to understand why the beavers who occasionally join me for a swim, have such nice fur coats! But Rancocas waters flowing around my body overheated by yard work in the hot sun and humid air, chill me off and bring such comfort to my frame that

*'I lie down in peace; at once I fall asleep;
for only you, Lord, make me dwell in safety.'* [Psalm 4:5]

I wrote above that our Rancocas is like the Nile only in that it runs north at our spot. But that isn't quite accurate. For as the soil deposited was named the 'gift of the Nile' by the ancient Egyptians, our creek also floods, and gives life as well.

The soil deposited by floods is interesting. It contains the silt of the soil that has washed in, along with the sand from the Pinelands. And while human detritus arrives (one spring brought a recycling can, a tackle box, a dog dish and a cooler), there are seeds of all sorts of plants deposited in our lawn, planted in their own growing medium. Some are weeds, others flowers, vines and trees. The floods bring life and bring it more abundantly, so abundantly in fact it now takes a tractor mower to imperfectly maintain that 'proper' suburban lawn.

"I don't know why I thought of that now, except perhaps because it is easy to believe in such moments that water was made primarily for blessing, and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash." So writes Marilynne Robinson in her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Gilead*, read while I sat on my stretch of Rancocas Creek bank. It reminded me of a lunch table conversation with one of my theology professors.

The Revd Dr. Charles Price was on the Church's Standing Liturgical Commission when the present Prayer Book revision was under way. He told us how there was a lengthy discussion within that group over whether the water for baptism needed to be blessed. When he was asked how that topic could even be raised, Charlie said something like this. 'Well, water in itself is a gift from God, it gives

life and new life, and it cleanses of its own accord. What more can you do for water than it already does by itself.”

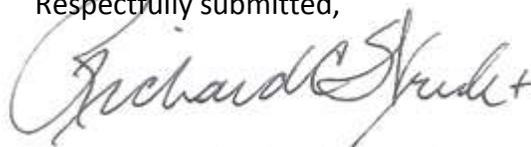
We were left to mull over that line of logic as we munched on our meals. The Prayer Book compromise was that the blessing in baptism was named ‘Thanksgiving over the water’, but the phrase, ‘Now sanctify this water, by the power of the Holy Spirit’ is a part of that Thanksgiving. Does the water need to be blessed? I’ve come to think that it does. Otherwise we take that basic element too much for granted. Thus, in that blessing, we concentrate on that fleeting moment where we stand in awe of the absolute marvel water is and the miracle the sacrament carries. How many, I wonder, have been baptized in Rancocas’ marvelous and miraculous waters by our churches over the last 250 years.

So then, even our humble Rancocas Creek, a ribbon of iron bearing cedar water, is a series of everyday miracles all too often left unseen as we fly over the bridges spanning her shores. Some of those wonders are a part of the natural order, some the product of human hands, others the stream’s recovery from the damage of our single-minded exploitation of the watershed’s resources. I invite you to seek the wonder of the divine in the humble, and let it minister to your heart and soul.

*Swift flowing water, pure and clear
Make music for your Lord hear
Alleluia!*

(Canticle of Brother Sun, Francis of Assisi, 1226)

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Richard C. Wrede". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

The Very Revd Richard C. Wrede
Canon Historiographer, Diocese of New Jersey