

EAST OF THE RIVER

Produced, Written and Directed by Kenneth A. Simon

The history of eastern Connecticut is an especially rich story. Prior to the arrival of the Europeans, Native Americans found the region to be a hospitable environment for hunting, fishing and trading. The area was the home to the Pequot and Mohegan tribes, two of the region's dominant Native American groups. It was later the region where critical alliances and clashes took place between and among natives and Europeans.

In the Colonial Period, "East of the River" had a palpable meaning to Nutmeggers. East and west were often riven by intense political controversies that centered on economic development, religion and politics. In no small measure, the state's strong support for the Revolutionary cause stemmed from the overthrow in the 1760s of an entrenched western Connecticut elite comfortable with British rule by a group of eastern upstarts. Today there remains a distinct "east of the river" sensibility both in how those residents see themselves and how the rest of the state sees them..

The region's character has been heavily influenced by agriculture and a rural lifestyle. Since the early days of European settlement, the region's many farmers and fishers helped to feed state residents and to create a significant economic engine. For towns in the northernmost sector of the region, their proximity to the river highways allowed local farmers (and also manufacturers) to reach important markets beyond the state's borders well before the advent of railroad and highway arteries. Towns like Lisbon and Franklin continue to cling to agriculture and a rural way of living, linking them with earlier values of the state, although encroaching suburbanization has caused great change.

In the early 1800's the emergence of mill villages presaged a transition from agriculture to industry that defined the Connecticut experience in the 19th Century. Later, it was in eastern Connecticut that true industrialization first took hold in the form of the massive textile mills that still define the landscape in places like Baltic, Willimantic and other river towns.

In the 19th and 20th Centuries, easy access to the sea brought great prosperity to some towns along the river and shoreline towns like New London and Stonington. This access, along with the region's location between Boston and New York, spurred profitable shipping enterprises and connected the state to the U.S. and the world. Boat building, fisheries, shipping and research have tied southeastern Connecticut to the sea from its earliest days.

The southeastern sector's shoreline and the natural beauty of the entire region have long attracted vacationers and tourists. Along the shoreline in the 19th Century, upper-crust vacation enclaves prospered with patrons arriving by rail and steamboat. In the 20th Century, some farmers farther north – notably in the river-accessible town of East Haddam – took in summer guests, at first friends and family, and later converting their farms to popular summer resorts. In the south, Ocean Beach in New London and other shoreline spots attracted increasingly mobile middle-class families. Today, two of the state's largest tourist attractions, Mystic Seaport and Mystic Aquarium, have renovated and expanded their exhibits and programs in an attempt to capitalize on the increased tourism in the area. Most of the inland resorts have closed.

One major element that has long contributed to the southern part of the region's character is the defense industry. Through most of the 20th Century, Electric Boat and a raft of smaller private companies offered secure employment and a sense of involved patriotism to generations of workers. Additionally, the Naval Submarine base and the Coast Guard Academy have helped to foster a regional defense mindset that, although diminished, continues to be significant.

Nothing, however, has brought such quick and unprecedented change to the region as has the establishment of two of the world's biggest casinos, Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun. After a long decline in employment levels, the area job market is now red hot, due to the creation of some 23,000 casino jobs,

about 15 percent of the region's workforce. Vehicular traffic has skyrocketed with an average of 70,000 patrons a day visiting the casinos, while other area attractions ponder how to tap into the casinos' success.

The success of gaming has not come without cost to the region. The state has certainly benefited from its share of the casinos' ever-increasing slot-machine revenues, projected to be about \$400 million this year. Neighboring towns, however, grapple with casino-generated change and the resultant stresses on their local budgets and rural lifestyles. Property values in surrounding towns have either risen or fallen in response to the huge new gambling resorts. Quality-of-life issues are increasingly the subject of local civic discourse, with residents expressing a broad range of feelings depending in part on the nature of the relationship that exists between the individual towns and their tribal neighbors.

Today, recovery, renewal and the challenges of growth dominate concerns across the region. Continuing suburbanization brings vast change and heated debate among residents of formerly isolated, rural towns. In the northeastern "Quiet Corner," the area continues to grapple with the effects of decline, decay and dislocation that followed 20th-Century textile mill closings as one mill after another went south.

The area's once thriving small cities are working on many fronts in hopes of revitalization and re-invention. In Willimantic, area leaders are determined to make the town into the urban center for the northeastern part of the state, promoting its location, diversity, history and investment value. In New London, the region's largest municipality, there are signs of a comeback. Pfizer, for example, has added 2,000 jobs with a \$250-million expansion of its headquarters and research facilities; Fort Trumbull is undergoing mixed-use redevelopment; the state pier has been rebuilt; OpSail attracted a million people and spawned a smaller annual event; and a strengthened real estate market has raised hope of a return to a prospering downtown. The region's second largest municipality, Norwich, has faced greater difficulties in its attempts at renewal but its location midway between the two casinos has led to a renewed sense of optimism, due largely to significant development projects downtown and increased demand for housing by casino workers.

With its narrative weave of history and current events, EAST OF THE RIVER will strive to be neither a puff piece nor a tourism promotion but rather a reasoned look at one of the state's unique regions. A trove of historic still photographs and archival film combined with newly shot material and interviews will bring a richness and depth to the program that reflects the beauty and heritage of its subject and the character of its people.

The program is produced, written and directed by Ken Simon. This is Simon's eighth program for The Connecticut Experience. His previous programs in the series have received two Emmy Awards and 16 nominations.