

STORIES of New Jersey

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ROCKAWAY RIVER: A GATEWAY OF THE IRON REGION

Although it is one of New Jersey's smaller rivers, the Rockaway was once important as the gateway to the vast magnetic iron deposits of Morris County. Its finger-like branches penetrate the northern hills beyond the Watchung ridges, where hundreds of shafts were sunk when New Jersey provided most of the iron for America. Most of these mines were abandoned as the industry shifted to richer deposits in other States.

Forges and furnaces set up in this region by the early colonists produced iron household utensils and ammunition for the Revolutionary Army. These Colonial industries are only memories now. But the brooks and springs that feed the Rockaway as it twists among the hills, draining an area of about 200 square miles, are still tinged with iron from the hidden veins in the rocky ridges.

The Rockaway's main stream is about 40 miles in length, rising southwest of Oak Ridge Reservoir. Its source is tiny Lake Madonna on Sparta Mountain, 1,200 feet above sea level and remote from any large town. From the lake flows a brook that joins others and becomes the Rockaway. Tumbling down its mountain stairway the river falls more than 1,000 feet to its mouth. It pauses long enough to fill depressions in its course, forming a number of lakes. The largest of these is the Jersey City Reservoir covering 120 acres south of Boonton. Throughout the region are numerous natural lakes fed by the Rockaway branches or drained by them. Other lakes have been created by damming the streams for waterpower.



The Rockaway Falls at Boonton

The North American Glacier dug out the beds of some of the lakes about 100,000 years ago. Others were created as the glacier pushed masses of gravel and boulders into water courses. Behind these barriers the water piled up until it overflowed. In recent years the lakes, the river, and the brooks have created a vacation land for thousands from the cities and towns. Commercially, the river is still a source of power for modern mills at a few points along its banks.