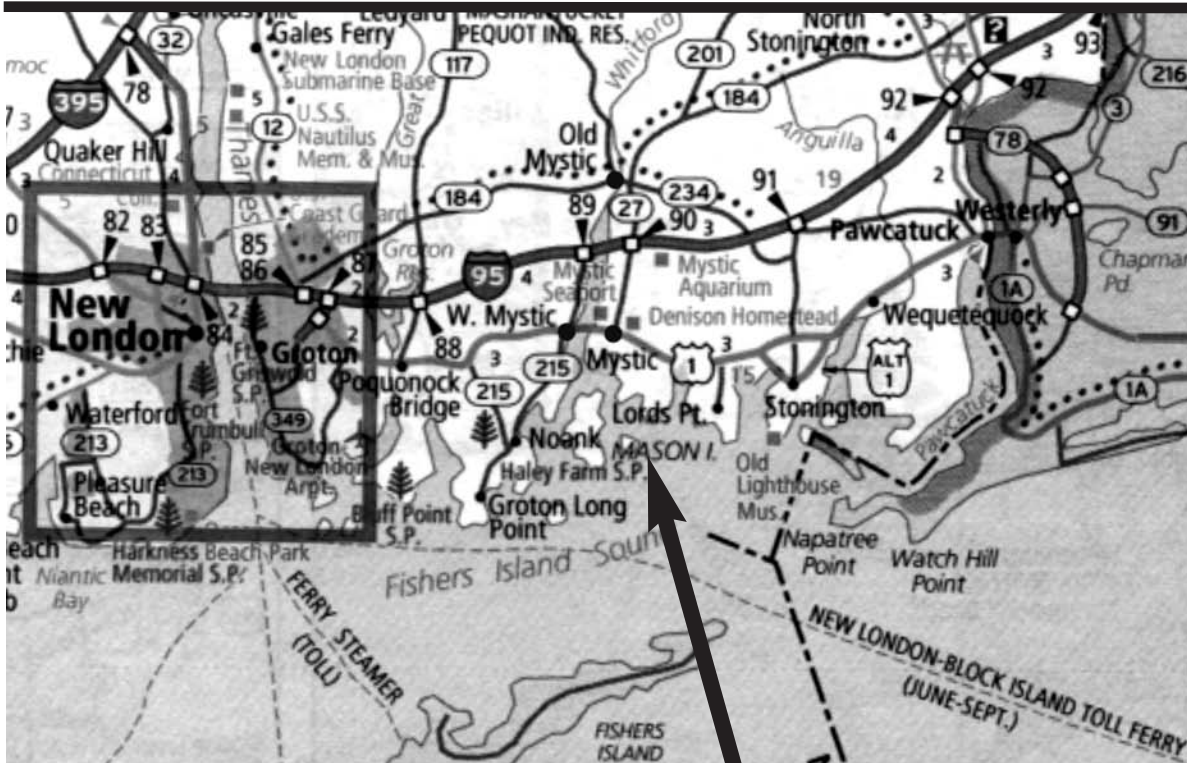


## The Paper Column by Peter Huntoon



# The Mystique of Mystic

**T**HE PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE IS TO DELVE INTO THE rare, beautiful and historic notes issued in the Mystic area of Connecticut. This is going to turn out to be a bit of a geography lesson because the thing that makes this tale so interesting is that the names of the settlements there were renamed, and the renaming occurred during the note issuing period.

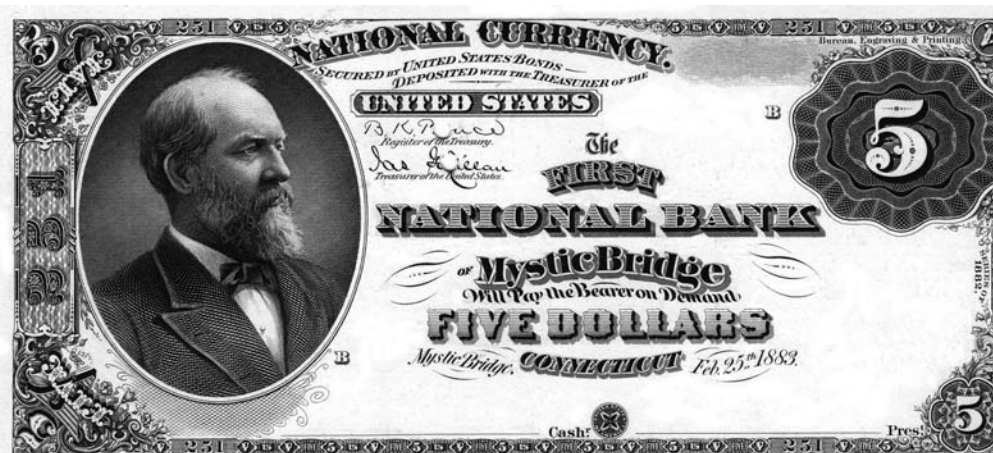
To get started, I recommend that you get acquainted with the accompanying modern map. Find Mystic, West Mystic and Old Mystic.

As you can see, present day Mystic is located at the mouth of a prominent, very protected estuary called the Mystic River which discharges into Long Island Sound. Mystic River is formed by the convergence of a few small streams at the north end of the estuary near Old Mystic.

The eastern tip of Long Island is off the map to the south, and you can see ferry lines going there on the map.

This perfect setting caused the Mystic region to be settled early as a

Modern map showing current place names and locations in the Mystic area of Connecticut. Long Island Sound and Long Island lie to the south beyond Fishers Island.



Top: The First National Bank of Mystic Bridge (Mystic today) operated from 1864 to 1894.

Above: The title blocks on the \$5 brown backs issued from The First National Bank of Mystic Bridge were made using patent lettering machines, and the treasury signatures were stacked, both being characteristic of early \$5 Series of 1882 plates.

farming area during the colonial era. Shipbuilding evolved into an important industry at the southern end of the estuary during the early 1800s, and six shipyards were active during the century.

A small whaling fleet called the place home, but whaling activities ceased from this port in 1860. Shipbuilding continued, but the conversion from wooden to steel hulls doomed the industry there in the late 1800s because the Mystic River was too shallow to accommodate the draughts of heavier ships.

Textile manufacturing ascended as the primary industry in the latter part of the 1800s, but that industry had succumbed by the mid-20th century.

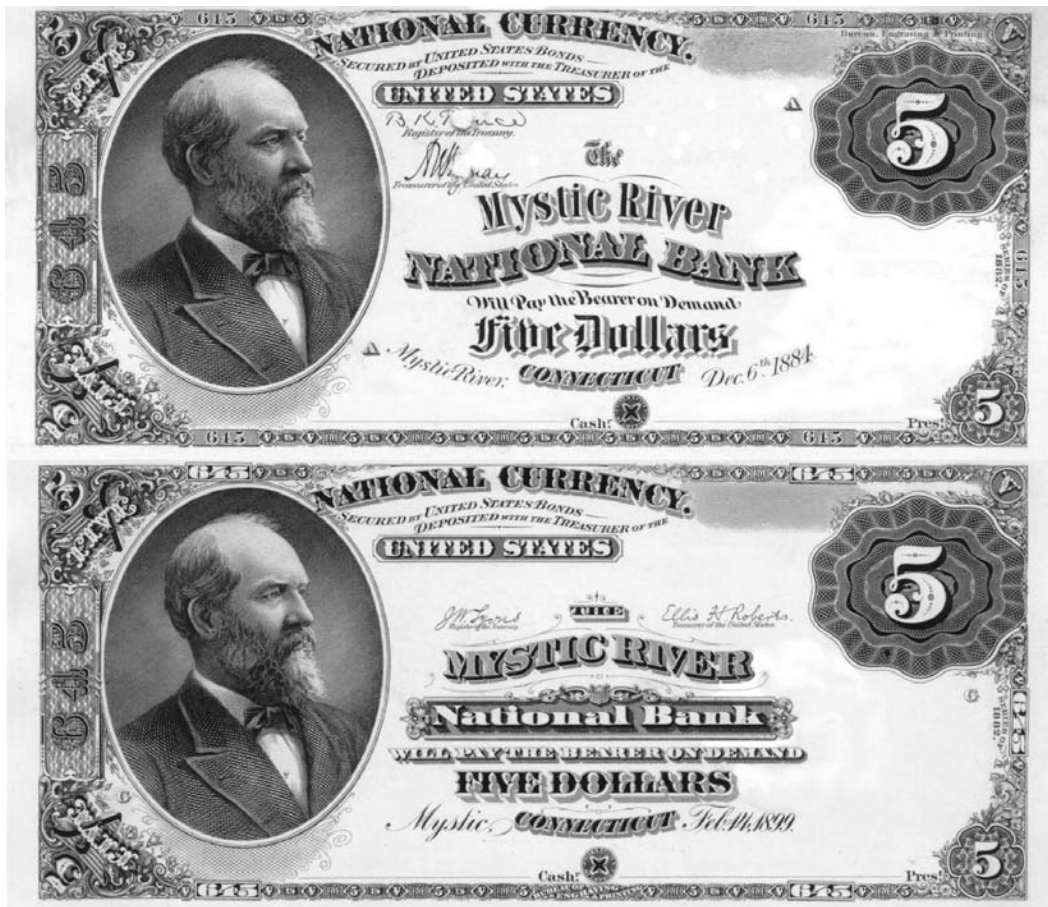
The charm of the place, and its proximity to Long Island and New York, assured that it eventually would develop into one of Connecticut's pricier tourist meccas. The place began to be discovered in the 1930s. Now tourism is the backbone of the economy, and, of course, the focus is on the sea, and the shipbuilding and whaling history associated with it.

The wealthy sail to its port in their grand yachts, while the plebeians ply its crowded shops in the summer months. One highlight for all is the *Charles W. Morgan*, a full-masted 1841 vintage whaler that originally was salvaged, restored and preserved by Col. Edward Green, one of America's most prodigious collectors, and the source of most of the number 1 Series of 1929 sheets and notes in your collections. The ship is the last of its kind.

The *Morgan* was brought to Mystic on a barge in unseaworthy condition exactly a hundred years after it was built. It arrived November 8, 1941, a month before Pearl Harbor. The boat had languished at New Bedford, Massachusetts, following the death of the Colonel, so upon arriving in Mystic, it once again had to be refurbished.

Now we have to negotiate the naming of the settlements and post offices in the Mystic area. Connecticut has towns and villages. Connecticut towns are





comparable to townships elsewhere in the Northeast. They are large, interlocking political subdivisions that date from the Colonial era. The town of Groton occupies the region to the west of the estuary, and Stonington is to the east.

Population centers that developed within the sprawling towns are called villages or cities, and these often have post offices named after them. Some cities have charters granted by the state legislature, or even by the towns in which they reside. However, many Connecticut villages are unincorporated.

Modern day Mystic and West Mystic are unincorporated. Instead, they jointly comprise a fire district respectively carved from the towns of Stonington and Groton.

What is now shown as Mystic on the map originally was called Mystic Bridge. Mystic Bridge had long been an important commercial settlement on the east side of the Mystic River. The sister settlement of Mystic River, on the west side, also is an old and prominent commercial center.

The first village to be called Mystic was located along the banks of Whitford Brook just above where it flows into the estuary. That area was predominantly agricultural, so the town lost influence as Mystic Bridge and Mystic River captured the bulk of the sea-based trade.

Mystic River lost its post office in 1887, and was served by the post office at Mystic Bridge for the next three years.

All three villages were renamed in 1890. Mystic Bridge became Mystic. Mystic became Old Mystic. The post offices were renamed Old Mystic and Mystic accordingly.

West Mystic was carved from Mystic River, and included all the prime water frontage there. A new post office was established in West Mystic that operated until 1976. Mystic River, without a post office, gradually disappeared from maps during the 20th century.

New plates were belatedly made in 1899 after Mystic River lost its post office. Notice that Mystic replaces Mystic River in the script postal location. However, the actual new name for the village where the bank resided was West Mystic! Mystic was across the estuary.



The Series of 1902 notes from The Mystic River National Bank still prominently displayed Mystic in the title block. The bankers ordered engraved signatures on their Series of 1902 10-10-20 G-H-I-C replacement plate.

The newly defined, but unincorporated, villages of Mystic and West Mystic flourished, and U. S. Highway 1 was built through them. Old Mystic became a backwater served by state roads.

The three note-issuing national banks in the Mystic area came into being early, and issued remarkably beautiful notes that generally are great rarities. Two of those banks had rather short lives.

The first to be established was The First National Bank of Mystic Bridge, charter #251. It operated between 1864 and 1894, when it was liquidated.

The bank was located on the north side of Main Street (now U. S. 1) just back from the bridge over the estuary. The building was separated from the water's edge by one or two other buildings.

The bankers did not apply for a new title to reflect the change when Mystic Bridge became Mystic in 1890. Only one ace and a deuce are reported from the Mystic Bridge bank.

The Mystic River National Bank was the next to be established. It was granted charter #645, and was situated in Mystic River across the estuary from The First National Bank of Mystic Bridge. It also was on the north side of Main Street near the corner of Bank Street within sight of the water. It was chartered in 1864, and issued through to the end of the National Bank Note era in 1935.

The bank was in the part of Mystic River that was split off to form West Mystic in 1890. At that time, the bankers were issuing Series of 1882 brown backs, and, like their brethren at The First National across the bridge, they didn't apply for a title change to reflect their renamed location.

What happened in this most interesting case was that the Comptroller's office belatedly imposed a *de facto* title change on the bankers in 1899 to reflect the fact that they had lost their post office in 1887. The Comptroller's office wanted their notes to better reveal where the bank was situated.

However, the situation on the ground was not clear from the distance of Washington, DC, so Mystic was mistakenly substituted for West Mystic as the postal location on the new plates. This anomaly belied the fact that bank was actually in West Mystic, and was served by the West Mystic post office.

This *de facto* title change was one of five known instances in the country where such a change was imposed mid-series in the Series of 1882. The title of the bank on the new notes came out as The Mystic River National Bank, Mystic.

The new plates had a plate date of February 14, 1899, which was the date when the new title went into effect, and the treasury signatures were updated from Bruce-Wyman to Lyons-Roberts to conform to the new date.

The title wasn't a formal title change petitioned for by the bankers, so the new plates were not treated as title change plates. Instead, they were handled as replacement plates.

Plate lettering advanced sequentially to the new plates, rather than



restarting at A for each denomination as was usual for title change plates. Also, bank sheet serial numbering progressed sequentially from the old to new printings, just as would have occurred if the plates had been replacements.

If you track such details, the changeover serial numbers between the Mystic River and Mystic Series of 1882 brown back printings were: 5-5-5-5 at sheets 4300/4301 and 10-10-10-20 at sheets 6420/6421.

Neither the bankers nor Comptroller ever corrected the location on the notes, so all the subsequent Series of 1902 and 1929 notes issued from the bank show the location as Mystic!

The third bank to be organized in the area was The Mystic National Bank, charter #1268. This was another very early bank dating from 1865. This bank was situated in the original town of that name at the head of the estuary, and the bank building still stands there today.

The Mystic National Bank operated until 1887, when it was liquidated. As the photos reveal, some of the notes issued there were knockouts. Only two aces are reported from the bank.

Of course, the village of Mystic, which hosted The Mystic National Bank, is now the village of Old Mystic.

The joy of dealing with these three banks was in the discovery that the locations shown on them do not correlate with the villages as we know them today! This knowledge coupled with the beautiful early notes issued from them makes for some real challenging collecting. Collecting notes from these banks requires a bit more sophistication than just sticking some neat notes into your albums, and maybe circling some towns on the map that serves as your check list!

### Acknowledgments

Helen Keith, a volunteer at the Mystic River Historical Society, generously provided much of the historical information presented here. Bob Kvederas Sr. supplied scans of historic maps which allowed me to unravel the name changes that occurred in the Mystic area. Jim Forte's list of U. S. Post Offices ([http://www.postalhistory.com/Post\\_Offices/index.htm](http://www.postalhistory.com/Post_Offices/index.htm)) untangled the post offices. James Hughes at the National Numismatic Collections, Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution provided accesses to the certified proofs of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing shown here. ♦

The Mystic National Bank operated from 1865 to 1887 in the original town of Mystic (Old Mystic today) along the banks of the Whitford Brook, just north of the Mystic River estuary. Mystic was an agricultural area then, and is now reached by back roads.