

# Tide Power in Colonial Boston

As the landscape of Boston changed over time so too did its economy. Early on the north Cove tide mills and a manmade mill-pond located in what is now the West End, sustained a small but growing town. The area between North Station and Haymarket Station, once the North Cove, was dammed and made into a mill-pond in the 17th century. The Mill Pond can roughly be placed where the Bulfinch Triangle is today, laid out by Charles Bulfinch in 1808 and bounded by Causeway, Merrimac, and North Margin Streets.

Colonial Boston relied on the nine-foot rise and fall of the tides and the Mill Pond, to fuel its many tide mills, which supplied the town with food, clothing, and building materials. However, the demand for food and other goods eventually outgrew what the mills provided, and an increasingly urgent need for land forced the Town Selectman to fill the pond and find resources elsewhere. Attempts to dam the North Cove go as far back as 1630, when a settler named Crabtree tried to take on this herculean task alone.



Hales Map, 1814  
Courtesy of the Norman B. Leventhal Map Center, Boston Public Library

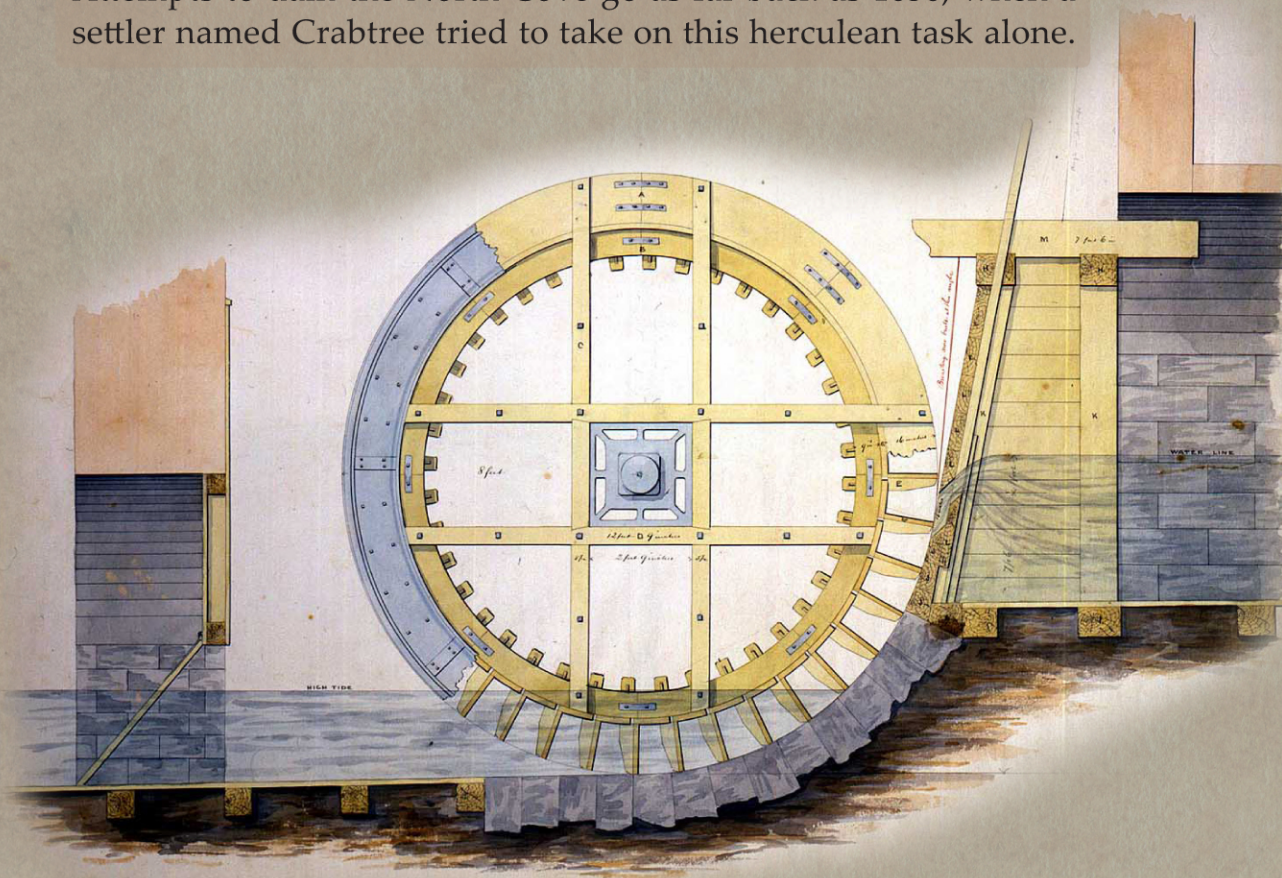


Greenway Millstone  
Courtesy of Duane Lucia

Thirteen years later in 1643, a second attempt was successful. Henry Symons and five associates brought the project to the town and were granted permission provided that the damming would lead to the construction of a millpond, and that the company would erect and operate mills. The town also stipulated that Symons and Co. build a floodgate ten feet wide for boats to pass into the Mill Pond, and cut the Mill Creek which lead from the Mill Pond to the waterfront. For access to the North End, they built a bridge over the Mill Creek wide enough to be traversed by horse and cart.

Three tidal mills were initially built when the dam was completed: two on the northeast end (now the North End), and one where the Mill Pond met the Mill Creek (now Haymarket Station). Remarkably, these mills were in operation for almost 150 years, until newer mills at the West End side of the dam were shut down. The mills at the northeast end burned down around the time of the Revolution and were replaced, and the two mills at Mill Creek's entrance were also replaced.

With the floodgate for the West End mills left closed, the western corner of the pond began to develop a stench from local privy runoff, and trash and dead animals carelessly thrown into the pond. Eventually the entire Mill Pond became polluted.



Wooden Water Wheel  
Courtesy of Franklin Institute of Science Museum