

2.0 LOCAL AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

The Town of Southeast is a picturesque and peaceful community of nearly 35 square miles located in the Harlem Valley in the southeastern portion of Putnam County just north of the Westchester County border (Figure 2-1). Within that area is a diversity of landscapes and community patterns including rolling hills, reservoirs, lakes, and streams, historic farm properties, and suburban housing developments as well as areas of commercial activity, both retail strips and office parks. The Village of Brewster, a separate political jurisdiction, is the historic center of the Town of Southeast and retains its identity as one of the centers of the Town.

The Town of Southeast is the economic center of Putnam County. The Town's access to major transportation corridors, including the Metro-North Railroad and interstate highways (I-684 and I-84), has made the Town an attractive location for new economic activity and a major exporter of workers to jobs in Westchester and Fairfield Counties, and New York City. As more people are choosing to live in Putnam County, Southeast has grown from a rural to a more suburban community.

The Town of Southeast is also at the center of the Croton Watershed, the source of 10 percent of New York City's drinking water supply. In all, 99 percent of the Town's land area lies within New York City's drinking water supply watershed. Five reservoirs are located in the Town—Bog Brook, East Branch, Middle Branch, Croton Falls, and Diverting Reservoir—and the drainage basin of a sixth, the Muscoot, occupies a portion of the southwest corner of the Town (see Figure 2-2). The drainage basins for these reservoirs extend beyond the Town's boundaries into neighboring communities in Putnam and Westchester Counties. Southeast shares watershed basins with Patterson, Kent, and Carmel in Putnam County and with North Salem in Westchester County. The East Branch of the Croton River flows diagonally northeast to southwest through the Town. In addition, several large lakes and wetland areas are located in Southeast: Tonetta Lake and Peach Lake form the nucleus of several residential communities, and the Great Swamp is a regionally significant wetland area that covers parts of Southeast and Patterson.

2.1 SOUTHEAST'S HISTORY*

The Town of Southeast was established in 1788, with fewer than 1,000 residents, as part of Dutchess County. Its location in the County gave the Town its name. In 1812, a new county was separated by the state legislature from Dutchess, and given the name Putnam. Southeast kept its name, as it remained the southeastern-most town in the new Putnam County. During these decades, Putnam County was the breadbasket of New York City: the rich lands in its valleys

* Material from this section is taken from the 1992 *Town of Southeast Master Plan* prepared by Buckhurst Fish Hutton Katz & Jacquemart, Inc. Minor editing has been done.

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were dairy and crop farms. Route 22, which traverses Southeast's eastern half, was the sheep and cattle drovers' road used for herds on the way to New York City markets.

The East and West Branches of the Croton River served as the foundation for the first settlements in the Town of Southeast. The neighborhoods of South East Centre (currently known as Sodom), Milltown, Crain's Corners (known today as DeForest Corners), Doansburg and Kelley's Corners (today, Tilly Foster) were the first settlements in the Town of Southeast. In time, additional communities such as Dykemans, Whitney's Corners, Gayville and Budd's Corners evolved in the northern portion of the Town. The neighborhoods of Dingle Ridge, Drewville, Sanford's Corners, Bailey's Corners, and Brush's Corners were formed to the south. Figure 2-3 illustrates the location of these old neighborhoods on a current map of the Town as well as Southeast's five National Register buildings. This figure also shows the designated historic area in Milltown, and three potential historic districts around Starr Ridge Road, Dingle Ridge Road, and Sodom as suggested by Suzanne Truran, Town Historian. These areas have a number of well-preserved historic homes, and a landscape largely unchanged from Southeast's early days.

An increased population by 1754 created a need for improved communication and, therefore, the development of new roads. South East Centre naturally became the hub for the major roads leading to and from the Town. Leading south to Westchester County and eventually to New York City were Main Street, Starr Ridge Road and Peach Pond Road. Howes Street, or as it is known today Brewster Hill Road, led in a northerly direction, and traveling in an easterly direction was Church Street (today Sodom Road). South East Centre prospered for almost 100 years. However, the arrival of the Harlem Railroad in 1849 drew development away from South East Centre to the Village of Brewster. Much of what was left of this center was then cleared during 1874 and the following years with the construction of the reservoirs.

A second original settlement that remains intact is Milltown. This area of the Town, as with many others, grew from the need of its industries to develop near a major water source, in this case, the East Branch of the Croton River. Established in Southeast's portion of the Oblong Valley, Milltown was a 1.8-mile tract of land on the eastern border of the Town by the crossroads of Milltown Road and Federal Road. It was also known as Ryder's Mill and Morehouse's Mill after the three grist and saw mills of the community. Three historic houses exist in Milltown today: the Gage House (circa 1719), the Axford House (circa 1850) and the Haines house (circa 1762). The Gage house is a saltbox farmhouse and is believed to be the oldest building of the area. Behind the house lies the Milltown Cemetery. The other historic cemetery of the area is the Gage Family Cemetery, located approximately two miles east of Route 22. The historic significance of Milltown was recognized when the Town Board of Southeast declared Milltown a historic area in 1988 (specific boundaries have not been mapped).

Dingle Ridge, a community also settled early in the history of the Town of Southeast, is located in the Oblong Valley on Dingle Ridge Road in the south-eastern portion of the Town. History tells us that this road was once part of the New York Post Road, and was a well-traveled route connecting New York City and Vermont. It was also part of the Boston Turnpike. Many of the original houses along the eastern side of the road still exist today. The open spaces in the Dingle Ridge community serve to maintain the rural quality of the area today.

In 1817, an iron foundry was established by the federal government in Cold Spring, a Putnam County village on the Hudson River. This heralded the industrial economy coming to Putnam County. In 1849, two railroads were built crossing Putnam, one along the river and the other through Southeast's long valley on the eastern side of the County. The Village of Brewster, in

the heart of Southeast, was founded in the late 1800s once the railroad had been brought to the Town.

Southeast developed an economy based on the industrialization of dairy farming. Gail Borden founded the Borden Condensed Milk Company that at its height processed ninety thousand quarts of milk a day. The transportation needs of the Borden condensery and the other dairy farms (which supplied New York City with ten percent of its milk supply) led to the creation of the local road network. Southeast's other major employer was the Tilly Foster Magnetic Ore Mine. This open pit iron ore mine began operation about the time of the Revolutionary War and thrived until it was shut down in the 1860s.

Southeast had a lighter side then, too: it was the winter home of one of the great traveling circus entrepreneurs of the day. Seth Howes and Old Bet, his elephant, would spend their winters in the Town.

In 1865 an event occurred whose repercussions are still felt in Southeast today. New York City was authorized by the State to condemn upstate land, securing itself a municipal water supply adequate for its burgeoning population. In 1883, the City bought land along the Croton River and began the construction of five reservoirs in Southeast. The waters held behind the Croton dams flooded hundreds of acres of Southeast farmland and desiccated the Town's existing natural lakes. The Borden dairy plant closed as the dairy farms it depended on were no longer in business. The Tilly Foster mine lay under the Middle Branch Reservoir. Southeast's economic health suffered and did not begin to revive until, ironically, the lake-like reservoirs began to attract vacationers to the area. In the early part of this century, New York City created new water reserves in more western parts of the County, leading to the revitalization of Southeast's lakes. One-fifth of Southeast's land area was now covered by reservoirs, streams, ponds, and natural lakes. The rest of the Town was unspoiled hills, long vistas, and the scattered upland meadows of the remaining farms. Several resorts flourished in this part of the County. Increasingly, vacationers began to settle in permanently, converting the summer bungalows into year-round homes. This slow change in Southeast's economy and population progressed until the end of the second World War. Then, as elsewhere, the boom happened. Development in the Town was accelerated by the building of I-684 up to Route 22, construction of I-84 in the 1960s, and the electrification of the railroad through to Brewster. Now, more than one hundred years after the reservoirs were built, fast-paced development had led New York City to again protect its water supply, this time from the encroachment of residential and commercial growth on the edges of its reservoirs. This further turn of history and its implications for growth and conservation in the Town is one impetus for Southeast's new *Comprehensive Plan*.

