



Cincinnati's Degraded Stream

Since the 1800s, Cincinnati has used and abused a watercourse once named the worst in the country – the Mill Creek. The creek has been essential to the growth of Cincinnati ever since the stream's name was designed to entice saw and grist mills to the area. Starting in the 1830s, slaughterhouse waste dumped into the creek caused a foul smell that troubled adjacent neighborhoods. In 1902, with 115 factory plants and numerous sewer outfalls along the creek, the Ohio Board of Health pronounced the Mill Creek the foulest wa-

tercourse in the state. Unfortunately, this did not stop Cincinnatians from polluting the stream. In 1914, the local Chamber of Commerce wrote off “the dirty fetid stream of today” as “the martyr of the onward progress of civilization.”

Over the course of the twentieth century, the steady expansion of the city increased the amount of storm runoff as roofs, streets, and other impervious surfaces replaced soils that once absorbed rainwater. As a consequence, steadily-worsening floods caused the polluted creek to overflow into neighboring communities. In an effort to prevent floods, the Army Corps of Engineers began to channelize the stream in 1981. Widening and straightening the creek, the Corps also laid down a concrete floor in the southern part of the creek, where it passed through the city, in order to drain floodwaters as fast as possible. Because of this channelization and the amount of pollution originating in the city, the creek's health differed between the northern and southern reaches of the creek. The north end of the creek flourished with an abundance of diverse species, while the urban end lacked biodiversity.