

Newtown Creek

Introduction

Newtown Creek is a 3.8 mile waterway connected to the East River, comprising a natural border between Western Queens and North Brooklyn. The Creek was originally a salt marsh environment with numerous freshwater streams feeding into brackish waters, including plentiful amounts of fish and shellfish harvested by native Lenape tribes and early European colonists. Growing industrial activity in the 19th century drastically altered the environment to accommodate factories and maritime use; this included filling in marsh, bulkheading shorelines, and deepening channels. By the early 20th century the Creek became one of the busiest waterways in the country, carrying more value and volume of cargo than the entire Mississippi River. Goods manufactured in the area included fertilizers, chemicals, glues, ropes, dyes, and many varieties of petroleum products. However, the decline of American manufacturing after World War II led to abandoned and underutilized properties as well as loss of skilled jobs in the area. Heavy industrial use, with insignificant environmental regulation and protection, left a legacy of toxic contamination, still present within the sediments of the Creek. In 2010, the Creek was declared a federal Superfund site.

Active Bulkheads

At its busiest, Newtown Creek was home to 500 manufacturing businesses. Over 15,000 vessels traversed the waterway annually. As recently as the 1950's, ocean-going freighters were a common sight as far east as Maspeth. These days, maritime traffic is less active, but there are still many working waterfront facilities which primarily handle waste and petroleum products as indicated on this map. Moving bulk materials by barge is more efficient economically and environmentally. A single barge has the same capacity as 28 – 56 long haul trucks, depending on the industry. Compared to other transportation modes, barge transport of bulk materials is safer in terms of worker injuries, generates far fewer toxic air emissions, and reduces maintenance costs for roads and bridges.

Street Access Sites

Newtown Creek is lacking in public access, with few official access points along its length. A number of informal street end sites around the Creek provide potential for public access, including the 'Plank Road' site in Maspeth where NCA began restoration work in 2013.

Greenpoint Oil Spill

In 1978, a Coast Guard patrol spotted an oily sheen on the Creek near Meeker Avenue. This spurred an investigation which found 17 to 30 million gallons of oil underneath Greenpoint, which had been released into the environment by Standard Oil (now ExxonMobil) and other nearby refineries during decades of operations. The spill is currently being remediated under supervision of the NY State Department of Environmental Conservation; as of 2025, just over 13 million gallons of petroleum product have been removed. This map shows the original extent of the plume - the largest upland oil spill in US history.

Potentially Responsible Parties

In 2010, the EPA designated Newtown Creek a federal Superfund site. Part of the Superfund process is identifying potentially responsible parties (PRP) that have contributed to the contamination and will be held liable paying for the cost of investigation and cleanup. The original Newtown Creek PRPs include ExxonMobil, BP, Texaco, National Grid, Phelps Dodge, and the City of New York. As of 2025, the EPA has identified a total of 21 PRP's.

Combined Sewer Overflow

As little as a tenth of an inch of rainfall can trigger Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO), which is when stormwater combines with sanitary sewers, overwhelming the capacity of treatment facilities and causing untreated sewage and stormwater to enter waterways via outfall pipes located throughout the city. The Creek receives an estimated 1.2 billion gallons of CSO each year, resulting in exceedingly poor water quality.

1600 Shoreline & Historic Features

The geography of Newtown Creek has been changed tremendously since the arrival of the first Europeans to the area in 1609. Shown here is an outline of the Creek as it existed at that time, with much of the surrounding shoreline consisting of extensive marsh and numerous streams feeding into the waterway.

NOTICE: Newtown Creek is a federally designated Superfund site. Due to poor water quality and contamination of the sediments within Newtown Creek, it is NOT advisable to swim, wade or consume fish or shellfish.

This map was produced in 2015, and updated in 2026, by Newtown Creek Alliance; for more information, visit newtowncreekalliance.org or contact info@newtowncreekalliance.org
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