The Ever Changing Swatara Creek

The Swatara Creek originates in the anthracite coal region of northeastern Pennsylvania, and flows southwest for 71 miles until it empties into the Susquehanna River here at Middletown. In 1828, a canal constructed along the Swatara began operating. The Union Canal, as it was called, provided an important link between Middletown on the Susquehanna River and Reading on the Schuylkill River. The canal enabled materials such as lumber, grain, and coal to be transported to this area from the mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania. The Union Canal’s success helped Middletown become a thriving business center.

One hundred fifty years ago, the banks of the Swatara were dotted with numerous sawmills, gristmills, iron forges and farms. The combination of residential, industrial, agricultural, and commercial activities steadily degraded the water quality of the Swatara. In turn, the Susquehanna River and the Chesapeake Bay were adversely affected. In recent years, a number of coordinated efforts have improved the water quality of the creek. Volunteer organizations conduct annual river clean-ups, plant trees along the floodplain, and promote environmental education. They also develop cooperative partnerships with area businesses, farmers, governmental agencies, and other citizen groups. The result of these environmentally friendly programs has been a gradual improvement in the health of the Swatara Creek, the Susquehanna River, and the Chesapeake Bay.