

The METROWEST DAILY NEWS

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The Bridges of Middlesex County

A timeless river awaits your visit.

Story and Photography by
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Where Middlesex County brushes against the Charles in South Natick, three bridges span the historic river.

Stowe's famous "Oldtown" lies between these graceful structures; an area of water,

woods, and history; and a memorable local destination for a sunny afternoon.

Across New England, history follows the flow of water. Although a river features in every major town in

Massachusetts, none winds more closely around our ancestral soul than the lazy, looping Charles.

Today a place for recreation, not so long ago the river was essential to daily life; as transportation before roads, a source of water and of power, and a convenient boundary. As history focused on

predecessors' lives as they are unappreciated by us today. Centuries ago, the first spans may have even been regarded with unease; they barely kept travelers dry. These monuments to necessity were often mere stones to make passage easier. As the population grew, the locals built wooden structures, then the solid, stable stone and steel arches we see today.

This stretch of river

*... then again sweeping silently, with many a winding curve,
through soft green meadows, nursing on its bosom troops of water-lilies
... while close alongside of the river, at its widest and deepest part,
ran one rustic street, thickly carpeted with short velvet green grass,
where stood the presiding buildings of the village.*

-Harriet Beecher Stowe,
from "Oldtown Folks"

Boston, Lexington, and Concord, "Oldtown" quietly built its own unique story, based on Native Americans, religion, commerce... and crossing the river.

Bridges over the Charles were as essential to our

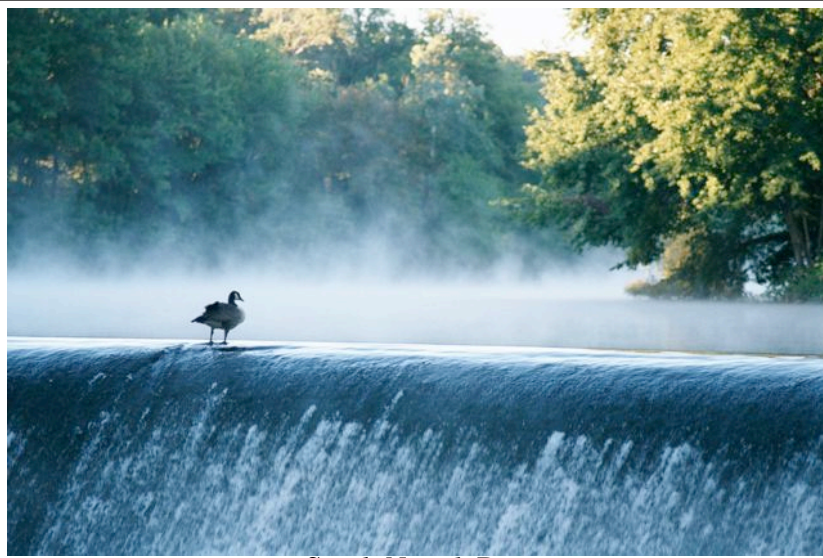
makes for idyllic walking, and boating, through a landscape in places unchanged over time. Whether one aspires to exercise, or simply to enjoy the view, the sanctuaries, parks and viewpoints along this section of the

Charles are all worthwhile. For boaters, a leisurely paddle downstream towards South Natick Dam offers up gently sloping woodlands under the protection of the Trustees of Reservations

memory. Like broken teeth emerging from the dark ripples, stones appear in a line too straight to be natural. Anne Schaller, of the Natick Historical Society, introduced me to some of the history,

stones” but are the piers for a cart bridge which the Bacons built to connect their farm land across the river with their homestead”.

In the 18th century, when these stones were the epitome of high-tech, South Natick was a farming community. Most inhabitants were Native Americans living near the Eliot Meetinghouse. They grew corn and oats, raised livestock, and fished in the river. One letter in the files of the Historical Society refers to the remains of an “Indian fish weir” just below



South Natick Dam

and The Massachusetts Audubon Society. Painted turtles bask in the sun on logs and stones by the water. Muskrats ripple along the bank. Great Blue Herons stand silently, then launch into the air on broad wings. On this stretch of river we also see mute reminders of our forbears’ efforts to keep dry.

Local Legends

While most crossings are immediately apparent, one is almost lost to

and legend, of these stones. In the past century, the locals referred to this as the “Old Indian Bridge”, a romantic image I was delighted to believe. Of course, history has a way of inventing itself for overactive imaginations. In the Society archives, an early clipping from the a local paper describes these stones: *“Unhappily for the romanticists, the stones in the river are not “Indian stepping*

the stepping-stones, the remains reportedly still visible in the early 1900s when the water level dropped.

Sargent’s Bridge

Soon after passing the stepping-stones, a gray rock shelf rises from the South bank. On top, the graceful statue of a girl gazes into the water. Visible from the road, haunting from the water, the tableau is so evocative of peace and sadness that a first

impression is of a memorial to a tragic drowning. Accurate history is once again slightly more mundane. Daniel Sargent, a Harvard professor, built the elegant home across from the statue in 1929, after purchasing land on both sides of the river. He planted trees and flowering shrubs

was built, angry farmers in Medfield complained that their fields were flooded, and so the mill and the dam were moved.)

After Sargent's Bridge, the river widens. Historic houses appear on the left, and marsh and woodland glide by on the right.

Three hundred and fifty years ago, this crossing was surrounded by the new homes built for the Nonantum Indians by John Eliot, after their removal from present-day Newton.

The history books show that the river at this point was supposed to have been a dividing line



The Eliot Bridge, South Natick

between Natick (a Native American town) and Dedham, with the Native Americans owning 2,000 acres on the North of the river. Despite Dedham's protests, the Indians were allowed by the Massachusetts

General Court to farm on the South side of the river. The flow of history has no shortage of

interesting eddies: the resolution of this dispute was the awarding of 8,000 acres in Deerfield to the town of Dedham to compensate for the farmland used South of the Charles. To this day, lands owned by the town of Natick still include a significant portion South of the water.

throughout the property, and added a stature of the Virgin Mary to embellish his view from across the river. He also built the picturesque bridge that bears his name, just downstream from the statue, where it stands on the foundation stones of a short-lived 18th-century dam. (That history is more interesting; after the dam

John Eliot Bridge, and the Dam

Built by Native Americans in 1651 as a footbridge between their homes and their fields, today's massive stone Eliot Bridge carries busy Pleasant Street traffic between Natick, Dover, and landmarks such as Marino's Lookout Farm, a mile from the bridge on the edge of Dover.

Since the first mill was built in 1733, here has been a dam above the Eliot Bridge. Today's popular Oldtown Parks marks a historic area where paper mills, saw mills, grist mills, nail factories, shoe factories, even electricity generating mills once stood. The canal built for this mill still exists as a narrow channel behind the houses along Glen Street, passing under a narrow bridge on Pleasant Street to the South of the river.

Above the dam, paddlers must take extreme care to not approach too close to the waterfall. An easy landing is available in the park to the right of the dam. For those who wish to continue down river, the choice is between a short portage across this park, or a short drive to the MDC landing at Elm Bank about a mile down river. The shallow water for 50 yards past the bridge will carry a small boat in the heavier waters of spring and fall, but in the summer is too shallow to navigate.

All Aboard for South Natick...

Below the Eliot Bridge, the river deepens, and winds around neighborhoods on Water, Lincoln, River and Schaller Streets. Here also once stood the Pfeiffer Shoe factory, one of the many shoe factories that flourished in Natick, at the end of the 19th century. As the river turns, massive granite blocks come into view on either side, all that remains of the B&M Rail bridge. Here, early in the 20th century, an electric trolley stopped on Water Street, en route from Framingham into Boston. Although it is hard to imagine a regular trolley, or even a bridge, at this spot, fifty years ago this bridge was taken for granted, as described in a local paper clipping from 1957: *"The old B&M bridge at the foot of water street has been torn down and taken away. Long abandoned by the railroad, it has for a number of years served foot passengers who wished to cross the Charles... Now it is gone, and the neighborhood realizes how easily we take for*

granted our heritage but do nothing about it."

Cheney Bridge and Elm Bank Reservation

Beyond the remains of the trolley bridge the river widens, and in the distance a gray metal span slides into view. Also accessible from Washington Street (Route 16) in Wellesley, close to the South Natick line, Cheney Bridge is the main access route to Elm Bank Reservation, a beautiful property listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Elm Bank is today owned by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and managed by the Metropolitan District Commission. The Massachusetts Horticultural Society leases part of the estate.

Built in 1897, the Cheney Bridge is an unusual single-span 3-hinged arch bridge, the last of its kind in the state. Refurbished in 1990, the more or less original bridge remains today. Paddlers will note the "C" on each side. As the gateway to a country home of yesteryear, there is a

pleasant feeling of romance to cross into the grounds. Delighted children call it the “Echo Bridge” for the startling reflection of a shout under the precise center of the arch.

Over 250 years, the 182-acre former country estate has alternately been part of Dedham, Needham, and Dover. Written records of its purchase extend back to 1732, during the reign of George II. It was given the name Elm Bank in 1740, when Colonel John Jones planted elms along the river. Today the layout of the estate largely reflects the efforts of Benjamin Cheney, one of the founders of the company that would later become American Express, and his daughter, Alice Steele Cheney Baltzell. The estate was briefly owned by Dartmouth College, and by the Stigmatine Fathers, before its takeover by the Commonwealth. The park offers miles of woodland carriage trails for walking and riding, open meadows and playing fields, and the many gardens and paths



of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society.

Downstream from the Cheney Bridge, as the river winds between Dover, Wellesley, and Needham, the river again becomes remarkably pastoral. But unless you want to dramatically increase the distance of your paddle, the best place to take your boat out is at the public landing at Elm Bank, about 150 yards below the bridge. Here you will find open space beckoning for a walk, and a picnic.

Separately, the river, the parks and the bridges offer a rich history. Together they award the visitor an afternoon, or a day, filled with

opportunity to explore. Whether you explore by land or across the water, visit the bridges of Middlesex County.

... Our road lay pleasantly along the brown, sparkling river, which was now just waked up, after its winter nap... the sweet-flag was just showing its green blades above the water, and here and there, in nooks, there were yellow cowslips reflecting their bright gold faces in the dark water...

-Harriet Beecher Stowe, from “Oldtown Folks”

When he isn't out kayaking, freelance writer Tod Dimmick is the editor of *Tastingtimes.com*, a website and newsletter devoted to food and wine. He is the author of four cookbooks, including the just-published *Complete Idiot's Guide to Cooking for Guys*.

What to see

Oldtown Park

This popular park, named for the famous book “Oldtown Folks” by local author Harriet Beecher Stowe, is by the dam in South Natick Village. On sunny afternoons people visit to relax, walk on the grass, fish, read on the park benches, or eat at the picnic tables.

Massachusetts Horticultural Society:

Located on the grounds of Elm Bank, this new home of the MHS is in the midst of exciting growth.

www.masshort.org

Natick Historical Society & Museum

The museum is located across from Oldtown Park in the lower level of the Bacon Free Library, and includes a wealth of local and regional memorabilia, artifacts and information. Hours are limited, so check ahead

58 Eliot Street

South Natick, MA 01760

508-647-4841

<http://www.ultranet.com/~elliott/>

Elm Bank Reservation

Miles of riverfront and woodland carriage trails, open meadows and playing fields.

900 Washington Street (Route 16), Wellesley, MA, (617) 698-1802

<http://www.state.ma.us/mdc/elmbank.htm>

Boating

The Charles River Watershed Association offers a terrific waterproof river map including detailed maps and paddling distances for the Charles from Boston to Bellingham.

(Charles River Canoe and Kayak Guide \$12.25. Tel: 617-965-5975, www.crwa.org)

Broadmoor Wildlife Sanctuary

This large sanctuary offers miles of trails, and an ongoing calendar of activities for adults and children.

280 Eliot Street, Natick, MA 01760-5513, (508) 655-2296

broadmoor@massaudubon.org

Marino’s Lookout Farm

Farm tours and events, apple and berry picking, Italian ice cream, and a popular organic farm market.

89 Pleasant Street

South Natick, Massachusetts 01760

508-653-0653

<http://www.marinolookoutfarm.com>