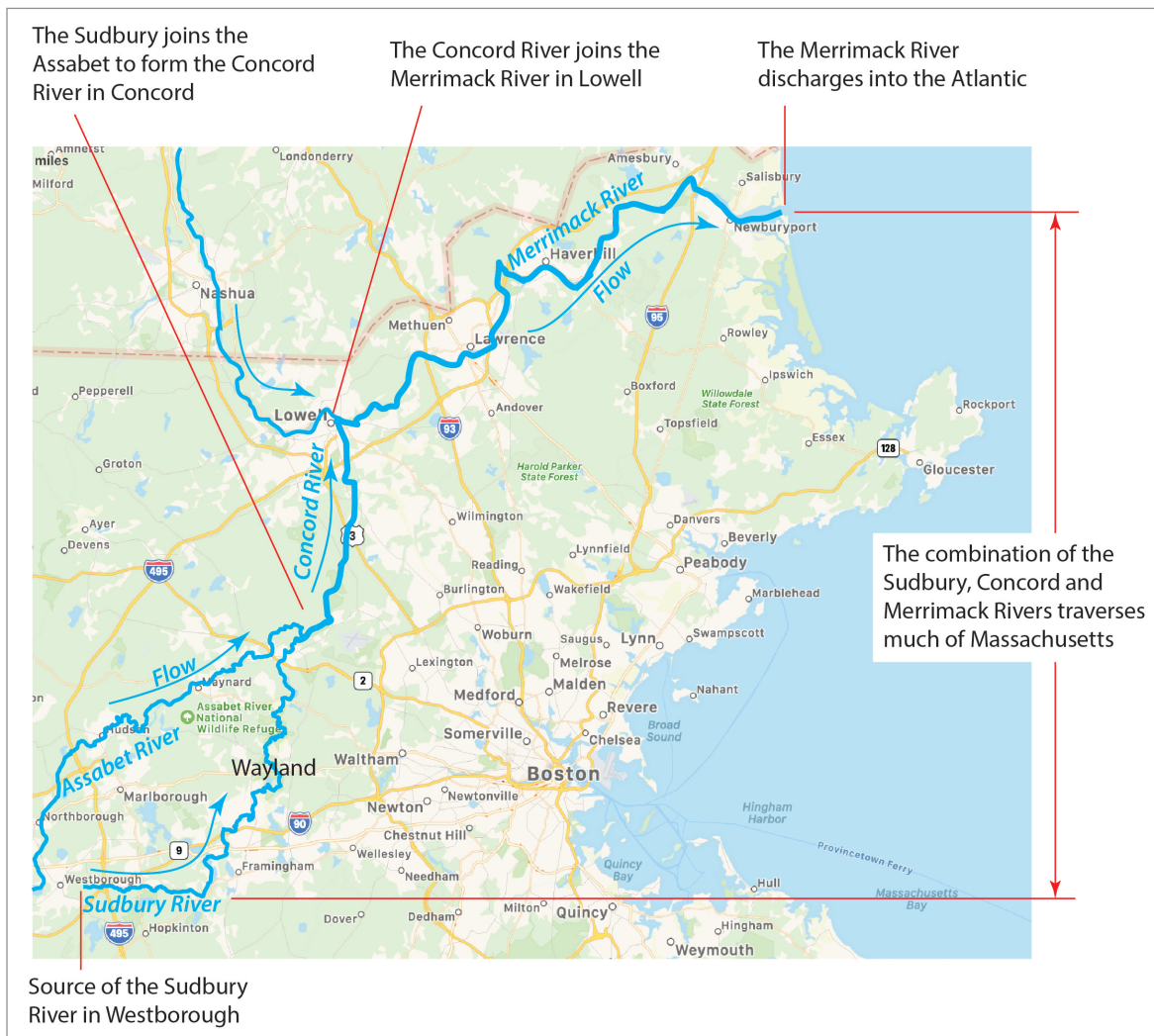


Crossing the Sudbury

After the last ice age when the glaciers retreated, they revealed a river system with fertile floodplains, swamps and marshes that posed a barrier to westward travel in eastern Massachusetts from Westborough generally northeast to Newburyport on the Atlantic coast. The winding Sudbury River is one long segment of that connected river system.

From its source in Westborough the Sudbury River travels generally easterly for a quarter of its length before turning generally northward through Framingham, Wayland, Sudbury and Lincoln. It then joins with the Assabet River in Concord, becoming the Concord River. The Concord continues to flow northward, ultimately joining the Merrimack River which discharges into the Atlantic Ocean in Newburyport.

Hence, for thousands of years, people living in eastern Massachusetts have needed to cross the Sudbury and its connected river system in order to travel further west. Archaeological evidence from native American occupants, historical records from European settlers beginning in the 1600's, and present day uses all illustrate the ways people have crossed the meandering river system as it winds its way northeasterly through Massachusetts.



Sudbury, Assabet, Concord and Merrimack Rivers in eastern Massachusetts.

Crossing the Sudbury

The watershed areas that feed into the Sudbury are notably wide and flat, particularly in Wayland and Sudbury. Residents living in the area for ten or more years have likely experienced the floods characteristic of this river system. The land around the main river channel can quickly be inundated by flood waters, covering roads and transforming adjacent buildings and basements into a literal floodplain.

Any traveler crossing the river on today's Boston Post Road or Old Sudbury Road will note these large stretches of flat marshy areas on both sides of the main channel. Boaters on the river during typical spring high-water can travel far from the main channel, if they wish to. The main channel itself wanders substantially, and has changed occasionally over time.



Aerial view of the Sudbury River in Wayland, courtesy Wikipedia.org

Following the path of the Sudbury can be confusing because the river flows from south to north in some areas, occasionally turning to flow from west to east at other spots, and it isn't always easy to discern the main channel from the adjacent flooded areas. Maps help us understand the compass orientation of the river channel in different locations, which helps to understand the placement of the various bridges and associated pathways that cross the river.

Wayland's history, landscape, industry, livelihood and recreation are all influenced by the dynamics of this graceful yet formidable river. This article highlights the history of two Sudbury River crossings that date back at least as far as colonial times, and that have been an important element of life in Wayland, both past and present.

Crossing the Sudbury

Wayland, the first settlement in the Sudbury plantation, was established in 1638 and incorporated in 1639.¹ Early town records reference paths and river crossings that were used by the Native Americans. In the 1880's when writing about Sudbury, historian Alfred Hudson suggests that the new settlers would likely have chosen the same river crossing points used by the Native Americans, but made the crossings wider since the earlier ones only accommodated foot traffic. Hudson notes that town records dating back as far as 1641 refer to bridges on the river.² These early bridges would have been constructed of timber.

The 1856 map of Wayland below shows a total of six bridges at five locations along the river. These crossings are identified (from south to north, following the direction of the river's flow) as: Stone's Bridge, Pelham Island Bridge, Boston Post Road Bridge, Town Bridge with its associated Canal Bridge and, furthest to the north, Sherman's Bridge.



Map of Middlesex County, Massachusetts by Henry F. Walling, 1856

Crossing the Sudbury

Today there are five active bridges crossing the river, one connecting Wayland with Framingham, and the others on roads leading from Wayland to Sudbury. From the south, the first bridge connects Wayland and Framingham where Stonebridge Road meets Potter Road. Continuing north (downstream) the next two bridges are at Pelham Island Road and Boston Post Road (Route 20) in Wayland. Further north we find the fourth and fifth bridges, one located where Old Sudbury Road (Route 27) crosses the river and finally at the town line where Sherman Bridge Road meets Lincoln Road.

Three now unused bridges remain standing in Wayland. The southernmost of these is the Old Stone's Bridge off Old Stonebridge Road. The second is a railroad bridge that served the now abandoned Central Massachusetts Railroad adjacent to Boston Post Road near Russell's Garden Center. The third, near the current Wayland Country Club on the former route of the original Old Sudbury Road, is the Old Town Bridge. All three of these unused bridges can easily be viewed and visited.

In colonial times, a traveler journeying west from historic Watertown (now Waltham/Weston) through Wayland to cross the Sudbury River used one of two routes. One route headed to the north end of town, through Wayland leading to Sudbury Center. The other route passed further south, allowing a crossing between Wayland and what is now Framingham. Historical records show early European settlers using one crossing by the Old Stone's Bridge at the southern end of town, and a second crossing at the location of the Old Town Bridge to the north.

Stone's Bridge

As early as 1674 a "horse bridge" is mentioned at the location where Old Stone's Bridge stands today, at the end of Old Stonebridge Road. Stone's Bridge was named for the Stone family, occupants of the area for generations.



Stone's Bridge, "David driving Melba across", viewed from Framingham. From the Wayland Historical Society's collection.

Crossing the Sudbury

A wood bridge at this location was reportedly used in the winter of 1775-1776 by Colonel Henry Knox to convey cannon from Fort Ticonderoga in New York to Boston, via East Sudbury. These cannon were used by General George Washington in driving the British troops out of Boston. There is a plaque at the bridge commemorating Colonel Knox's use of the bridge route.

The final bridge at this location, known as the old Stone's Bridge, was built in 1857 or 1858 to replace an older wood bridge, and it carried Framingham-bound traffic for almost 100 years. The four-arched old Stone's Bridge is visible from the modern Stonebridge Road bridge, and can be accessed on foot from the end of Old Stonebridge Road.



Official town records in both Framingham and Wayland document ongoing maintenance and major repairs to the stone bridge structure. Its narrow width and overall safety concerns caused many years of controversy about bridge maintenance and use, all to no avail. But use of the stone bridge ultimately ended abruptly when the road surface and structure above the arches was damaged by flooding from Hurricane Diane in August 1955. After the hurricane, traffic flow was restored via the installation of a temporary "Bailey Bridge"³ located immediately above the damaged stone bridge.

One year later, Framingham and Wayland, along with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts agreed to build a new roadway approach and bridge crossing. Starting in 1957, that section of Stonebridge Road was moved and a new bridge was constructed 100 yards south of the former location.

The Wayland Historical Society was influential in the effort to preserve the remains of the old Stone's Bridge given its significance as an early Sudbury River crossing. Part of the preservation work entailed reducing potential damage to the bridge from future flooding. The ultimate solution was to widen the river by removing a portion of the west bank to allow the

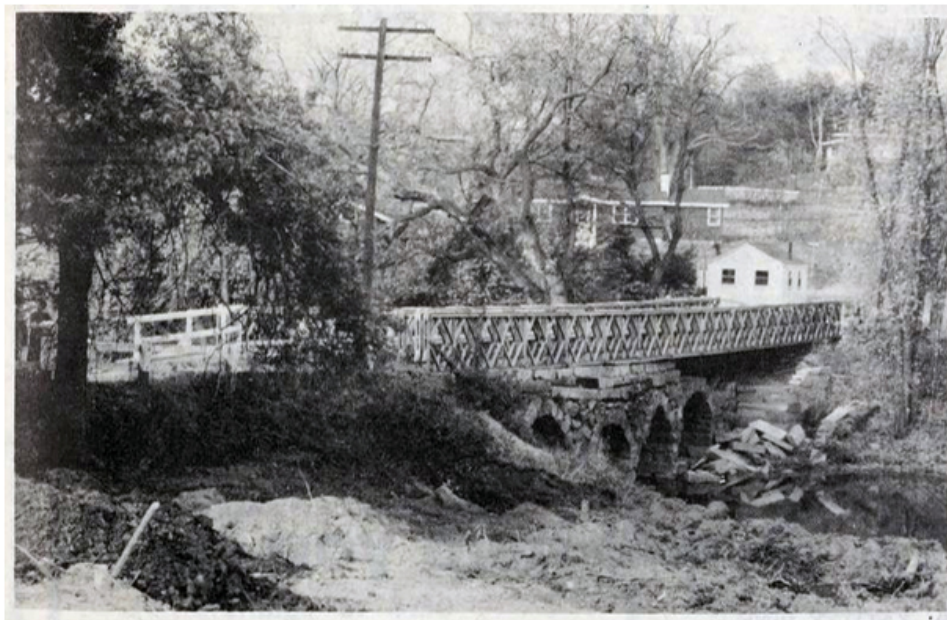
Crossing the Sudbury

majority of water flow to pass to the west of the old bridge. This explains why the remaining old Stone's bridge is entire, but no longer connects to the west shore of the river.

The photograph below taken at high water in late summer of 1953, two years before Hurricane Diane, conveys a sense of the bridge's narrow width. The background of the photograph shows the far bank that was subsequently excavated and removed in 1957 to allow water to go around the Stone Bridge thereby reducing stress on the bridge and preventing further damage.



"Water rushing under old bridge on Stonebridge Road Sept. 12, 1953" Viewed from Wayland facing Framingham. From the Wayland Historical Society's collection.



Photograph from an October 31, 1957 issue of The Town Crier showing the Bailey Bridge over the hurricane-damaged Stone's Bridge.

Crossing the Sudbury

Old Town Bridge and Associated Canal Bridge

The first European settlers of Sudbury Plantation, arriving in 1638, made their homes near the current North Cemetery on Old Sudbury Road in what is now Wayland. There they found excellent pasturage for their cattle in the river floodplain, and a river crossing near this location would have been useful almost immediately. Not surprisingly, by 1641 we find references to a bridge where the Old Town Bridge is located. This location has been identified as one of the oldest river crossings in Middlesex County.⁴

In 1848, Josiah Russell built a four-arch stone bridge now called the Old Town Bridge at this site, replacing an earlier timber bridge. The stone bridge was totally reconstructed, in situ, in 1903. For a period of time, the Old Town Bridge was included in the National Register of Historic Places, but it was later de-listed when the full scope of the 1903 reconstruction became clear.



Old Town Bridge, photograph by Cutting, after the 1903 reconstruction, as viewed from downstream. From the Wayland Historical Society's collection.

Use of the Old Town Bridge was discontinued as a result of a modern-day re-routing of Old Sudbury Road (Route 27) to the south of the original roadway and bridge location. However, the four-arch structure is easily visible from the current river crossing, and accessible by foot, following the old roadway.

Hudson, the Sudbury historian, writes about that crossing:⁵ *“The first bridge at this place was probably a simple contrivance for foot-passengers only, and one which would cause little loss if swept away by a flood. The reason why this spot was selected as a crossing, may be indicated by the lay of the land and the course of the river; at this point the stream winds so near the bank of the hard upland, that a causeway on the eastern side is unnecessary. These natural features doubtless led to the construction of the bridge at that particular spot, and the location of the bridge determined the course of the road. About the time of the erection of the first bridge a ferry is spoken of. In 1642 Thomas Noyes was ‘appointed to keep a ferry for one year, for which he was to have two pence for every single passenger and if there be more to take two apiece.’*

Crossing the Sudbury

This ferry may have been used only at times when high water rendered the bridge or meadow impassable. As in the price fixed for transportation only 'passengers' are mentioned, we infer that both the bridge and ferry were for foot-passengers alone. But a mere foot-path could not long suffice for the settlement. The west side was too important to remain isolated for want of a cart-bridge."



From a Photograph by A. W. Cutting.

THE OLD TOWN BRIDGE.

The first "cart bridge" in Sudbury over the river was built at this spot about 1643, and the structure then erected is said to have been the first frame bridge in Middlesex County.

The settlers came ; they spanned the stream
With quaint old bridge of massive beam ;
And through the years that since have rolled,
A bridge has cast its shadow cold
From bank to bank, where dark and slow
The Musketahquid's waters flow.

Home Melodies.

Crossing the Sudbury

The historic origin of the associated Canal Bridge is not as clearly documented as that of the nearby Old Town Bridge. We do know that the river formed an oxbow here with its apex to the east, which the Old Town Bridge crossed. Some records suggest that during annual floods the river rose sufficiently to isolate the oxbow entirely, thereby creating an island and cutting off passage west via the Old Town Bridge. Other records indicate that the bypass (known as the “Canal”) was man-made, allowing river traffic a straighter passage.

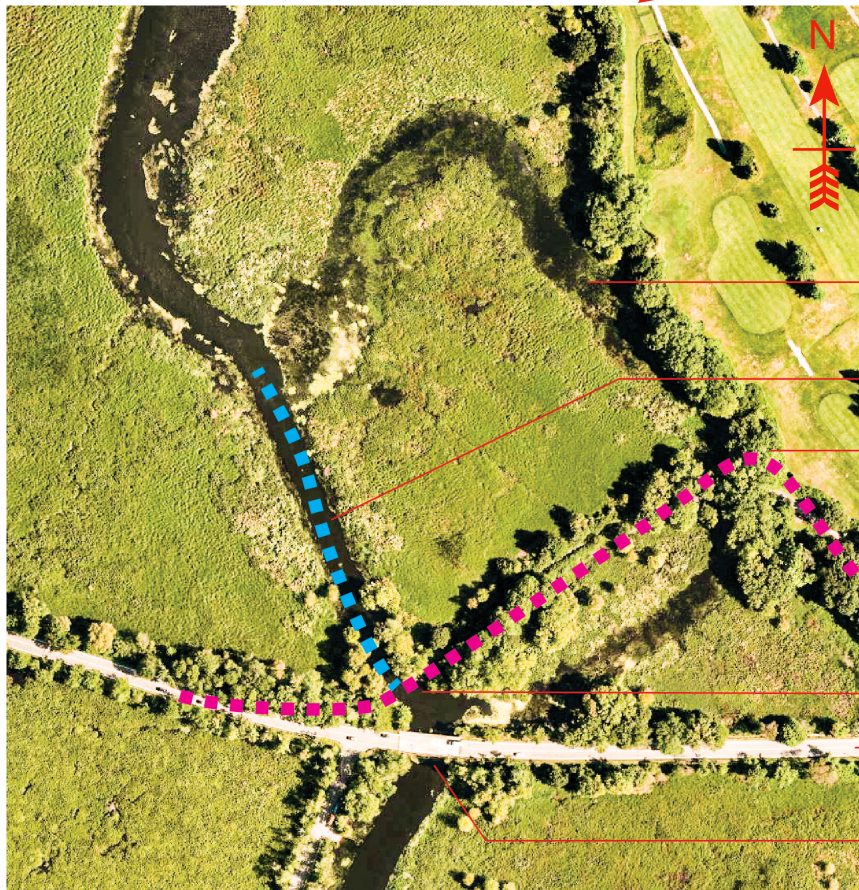
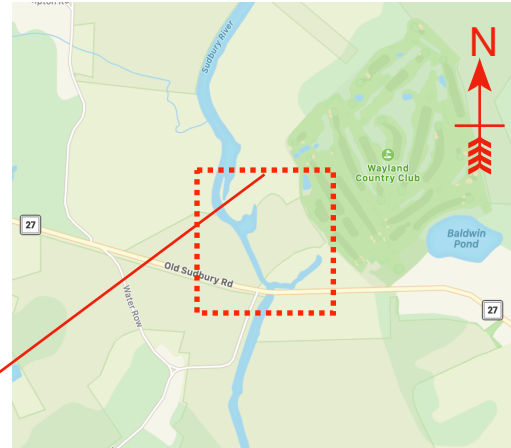


Canal Bridge as viewed facing east. To the left Old Sudbury Road continues to the Town Bridge, leading to Wayland center. To the right, but out of view of this photograph, the road intersects with River Road. From this point, travelers could head south on River Road or continue west to Sudbury center. From the Wayland Historical Society’s collection.

The Canal Bridge was a single arch stone bridge that enabled the crossing of the “canal” even when the water was high. Similar to the fate of Old Stone’s Bridge, the Canal Bridge was severely damaged by Hurricane Diane in 1955, and it no longer exists, although its location is still marked by some discontinued water pipes and the former roadway.

Crossing the Sudbury

Current-day satellite view showing the canal and oxbow section of the Sudbury River. Today the main flow of the river is through the former “canal”, shown in dotted blue. The roadway used back when the Town Bridge was in use, is shown in dotted red



- Main course of the river when the Town Bridge and its predecessors were built
- Canal
- Town Bridge
- Roadway before rebuilding from 1955 hurricane damage
- Canal Crossing
- Old Sudbury Road
- Current-day Bridge

The Sudbury River and its associated wetlands clearly provided a lush source of food for Native Americans, the European settlers of the 1600’s, and succeeding generations up through the farmers of the twentieth century. Although the river and its surrounds no longer supply us with agricultural produce, they continue to be a valuable part of the local ecosystem, and a necessary element of our daily journeys.

Our river crossings today primarily support vehicular traffic, and speedy travel in modern vehicles can diminish awareness of our environs and history. Perhaps reading this article will foster renewed appreciation for the importance of the bridges we use today to cross the Sudbury River, and also for the remains of former bridges that served our Colonial antecedents and their descendants.

Crossing the Sudbury

References

¹ Wayland Historical Society. *A Short History of Wayland*
<https://www.waylandmuseum.org/history-of-wayland>

²Hudson, Alfred Sereno. *The History of Sudbury, Massachusetts 1638-1889*. The Town of Sudbury, 1889. p.179

³ A Bailey Bridge is a type of portable, prefabricated, truss bridge. It was developed in 1940-1941 during World War II.

⁴Hudson, Alfred Sereno. *The History of Sudbury, Massachusetts 1638-1889*. The Town of Sudbury, 1889. p.96

⁵Hudson, Alfred Sereno. *The History of Sudbury, Massachusetts 1638-1889*. The Town of Sudbury, 1889. p. 93

