Old New England Canals

By PARK PRESSEY

IN these days of steam, electricity, jet engines and atomic power, we are likely to forget that when this country was first settled wind and water were the only sources of power, aside from animals. Wind could turn windmills and fill the sails of boats. Water furnished the surface on which the boats floated, and by its weight in falling could turn waterwheels.

Many places, however, had no water power readily available. Contentment, as Dedham, Massachusetts, was first called, was one of these. The little village was in sore need of a gristmill, but its one principal stream, Mother Brook, ran into the Charles River with an insufficient fall to furnish power to run a mill. Surveys showed, however, that the Neponset River on the other side of the settlement was nearly sixty feet lower than the Charles at the village. Within three years after the first settlers came in 1636 the following vote was passed: "Ordered yt a Ditch shalbe made at a Comon Charge through purchased medowe vnto ye East brooke. yt may both be a ptičon [partition ?] fence in ye same: as also may serue for a Course vnto a water mill: yf it shalbe fownd fitting to set a mill vpon ye sayd brooke by ye Judgemt of a workemen for yt purpose."

By using the natural brook as far as possible and then digging a channel the rest of the way to the Neponset the flow of water was reversed. From the Charles it ran through the canal to the Neponset and in its descent over a three-mile course furnished considerable power.

As the Old Town Mill was built at New London, Connecticut, in 1650, at the town's expense and a monopoly of its use given to "Mr. John Winthrop and his heirs so long as they do up hold a milne to grind the town corn," so the Mother Brook project was carried forward at public charge. Exclusive use of its water, however, was given to the builder of the first mill, together with a grant of sixty acres of land.

John Elderkin of Lynn built the first mill, a gristmill, in 1641. There was no other building on the canal for nearly thirty years, but the grants were increased through the years to five and many prosperous industries grew up along its banks after it had been widened and deepened. It is still the manufacturing center of the town.

At the end of the eighteenth century wind and water were still the only available sources of power and transportation, and Mother Brook (which had been used for power only) became the forerunner of a much more ambitious project, the Middlesex Canal. Forward-looking men conceived a plan to shorten the distance by boat from Boston to the Merrimack River by building an inland waterway through the twenty-seven-mile stretch between the two points.

In 1793 the General Court granted a charter to the Proprietors of the Middlesex Canal. The signing of this act is said to have been the last official service of Governor Hancock. Ten years later the first boat made its trip over the full length.

James Sullivan and Col. Laommi Baldwin were the leading spirits in the enterprise. The former was attorney general of Massachusetts, 1790-1807, and governor, 1807-1808. The latter became superintendant of the canal and was "the

animating spirit of this stupendous work," but now he is chiefly remembered for having an apple named after him!

The course of the canal which was used for transportation only was from Middlesex Village (then a part of Chelmsford) through Billerica, Wilmington, Woburn and Medford to Charlestown Mill Pond. Winchester and Somerville are now on the line, but at the time the canal was put through, Winchester had not been separated from Woburn and Medford, and Somerville was still part of Charlestown. From the Charlestown Mill Pond some of the boats were floated across the Charles River to Boston Mill Pond where it made connection with Mill Creek. In the early days Mill Creek was simply a tidal brook which ran through the marsh between the Charles and South Bay. At high tide it shut off the North End completely from the rest of the town, and contact was maintained only by two bridges across it. Tide mills on its bank furnished enough power to grind corn. After the mills had been abandoned, the Middlesex Canal proprietors purchased the right-of-way, widened and deepened the creek, and floated boats through it nearly to Faneuil Hall.

From Billerica Mills, where the canal took water from the Concord River, the height above sea-level was one hundred and four feet, and in the other direction there was a drop of twenty-seven feet to the Merrimack. It was necessary, therefore, to construct twenty locks to adjust the water to the varying levels, and also to build aqueducts over seven brooks and rivers. This was expensive business, even when workmen got not over ten or twelve dollars a month "and found." Before the work was completed over a million dollars had been put into the project.

The square-ended boats were from forty to seventy feet long and about nine feet wide. They were guided by a long oar at the stern. Once started they floated readily, and a single horse could draw a load of twenty tons, while a yoke of oxen would pull a raft of lumber many times that weight. Two horses usually accompanied a boat, but they took turns in hauling it. In the case of passenger boats two horses were driven tandem.

At the time the canal opened for business ninety thousand cords of wood a year were required in Boston and vicinity, and this alone made the enterprise a profitable one. Fruit, butter, cheese, meat, and many other commodities were also brought down from the country towns, and "West Injy goods," fish, and manufactured articles furnished the return cargo.

In the days before railroads and street cars, many persons considered it a very pleasant outing to take a trip from Boston to Medford or Woburn by the "swift packet boat Governor Sullivan." The *Sullivan* and the *General Washington* carried passengers only. They had good-sized cabins and several berths. When the horses were kept at a trot they made a speed of four miles an hour.

The opening of the canal brought about a new order of things in many ways. For instance, "in consideration of the great distance from home at which the users of the canal often found themselves at the end of the week" Sunday travel was permitted. This was frowned upon by many who felt, as did the good minister of Chelmsford, that it was "greatly to be feared that the morals of the people in these towns will be corrupted by the transaction of business upon the canal on the Sabbath." To be sure, there was a rule that the boatmen should not "disturb the places of public worship near which they pass, nor occasion any noise to interrupt the tranquillity of the day," nor could

they blow their signal horn to notify the lock tender of an approaching boat, but a new order of things was on its way.

All travel on the canal had to stop at night because there was no way of lighting the towpath. For this reason many taverns grew up along the line. These became famous for their hospitality and as social centers in their communities. The Bunker Hill tavern in Charlestown, Bud Parker's and the Fountain Inn in Medford, and the Horn Pond House in Woburn were all well-known stopping places.

Business took on new vigor after the War of 1812, and the palmy days of the canal were 1819-1836. The Proprietors had plans for extending their waterway by use of the Merrimack and other rivers. They dreamed of cutting through to the Connecticut, and even to Lake Champlain and the St. Lawrence. They spent nearly $100,000 on locks and canals that opened up the Merrimack as far as Concord, New Hampshire. Then the whole project received a death blow from an unexpected source.

REMAINS OF AQUEDUCT FOR THE MIDDLESEX CANAL OVER SHAWSHEEN RIVER IN WILMINGTON, MASSACHUSETTS
From an old photograph, *c.* 1900

The beginning of the end came with a petition for a charter for a railway between Boston and Lowell. Of course the proprietors of the canal made a vigorous fight against the paralleling of their right-of-way by a competing line. They argued that "passengers are now carried, at all hours, as rapidly and safely as they are anywhere else; and if the usual time consumed in passing from one place to an-

other be three hours, there seems not to be any such exigency to make that space of time half what it is now as to justify the establishment of a railroad for that purpose only." It was also contended that a railroad could not possibly go beyond Lowell, and it would not be wise to ruin their enterprise for so short a haul.

Notwithstanding these protests, the railroad secured a charter, and game to the last the canal carried much of the material for its building. This even included the first two locomotives which were floated in parts to Lowell by boat to be assembled there. The year this new railroad opened the business of the canal fell off by one third.

Although more than one hundred years have passed since the last boat went through the canal, traces of its path are still found. Of course, Charlestown Mill Pond was filled in long ago; Sullivan Square station is now near the spot where the outlet was located. The Lowell end at Middlesex Village is now covered with a multitude of railroad tracks and Boston Mill Pond (which extended from North Margin St. to South Margin St. and covered the present Haymarket Square and the site of North Station) was filled in with the earth taken from the top of Beacon Hill. Mill Creek was also filled and is now covered by Blackstone St.

An interesting portion of the old aqueduct across the river connecting the Mystic Lakes can be seen from the parkway between Medford and Winchester, and long stretches of the old channel still exist through Billerica and Wilmington. At North Billerica the old towpath still projects far into the basin of the Concord River. From its end a floating towpath once extended to solid ground on the other side. In a rock nearby a big iron ring still exists to which boats once tied up, and parts of the locks may be seen at the foundation of Talbot Mills in North Billerica and also in Wilmington. Little else remains, however, to mark the course of this enterprising inland waterway which was doing a thriving business in Massachusetts a full twenty-five years before Governor Clinton's great project, the Erie Canal, was brought into existence.