

Crossing the Sudbury

How Wayland flows with the Sudbury River

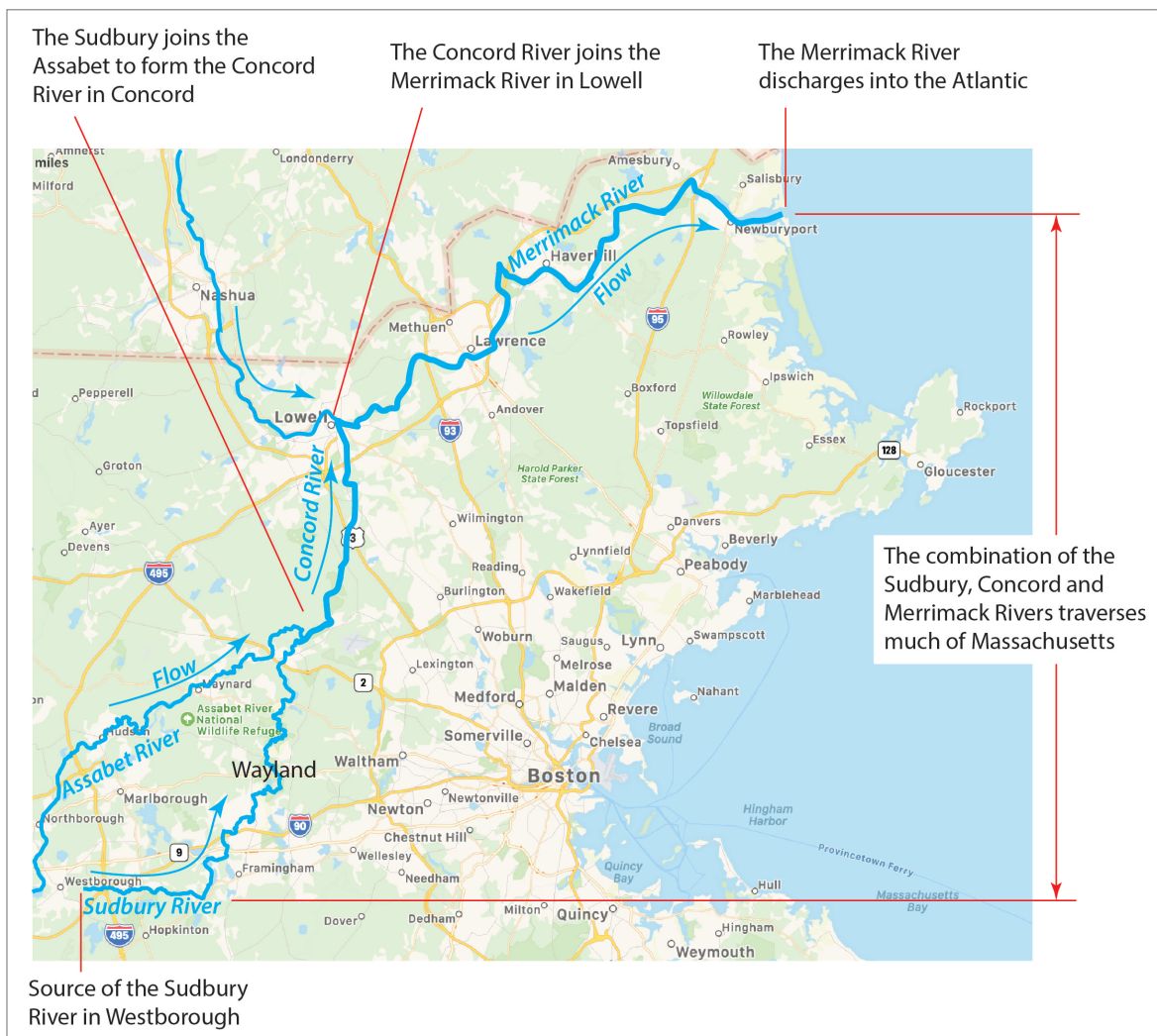
DRAFT-8

After the last ice age when the glaciers retreated, a river system with its fertile floodplains, swamps and marshes stretched as a barrier to westward travel all the way from Westborough to Newburyport on the Atlantic coast. The Sudbury River is a long link in that chain. Hence crossing the Sudbury (and its connected rivers) has been a necessary activity for humans in eastern Massachusetts for thousands of years. Archaeological evidence of native American occupants, historical records of the European settlers beginning in the 1600's, and our current-day resources demonstrate the efforts that have been made to cross the meandering Sudbury River as it winds its way northeasterly through Massachusetts. Wayland's history, landscape, industry, livelihood and recreation are all influenced by the dynamics of this graceful yet formidable river.

This article will highlight the history of two Sudbury River's crossings that have been an important part of life in Wayland's past and present.

The Sudbury River

The source of the Sudbury River lies in Westborough, from where it travels easterly for a quarter of its length before flowing northward through Framingham, Wayland, Sudbury and Lincoln to join with the Assabet River in Concord to form the Concord River. The Concord River then flows north to join the Merrimack River which discharges into the Atlantic Ocean at current day Newburyport.



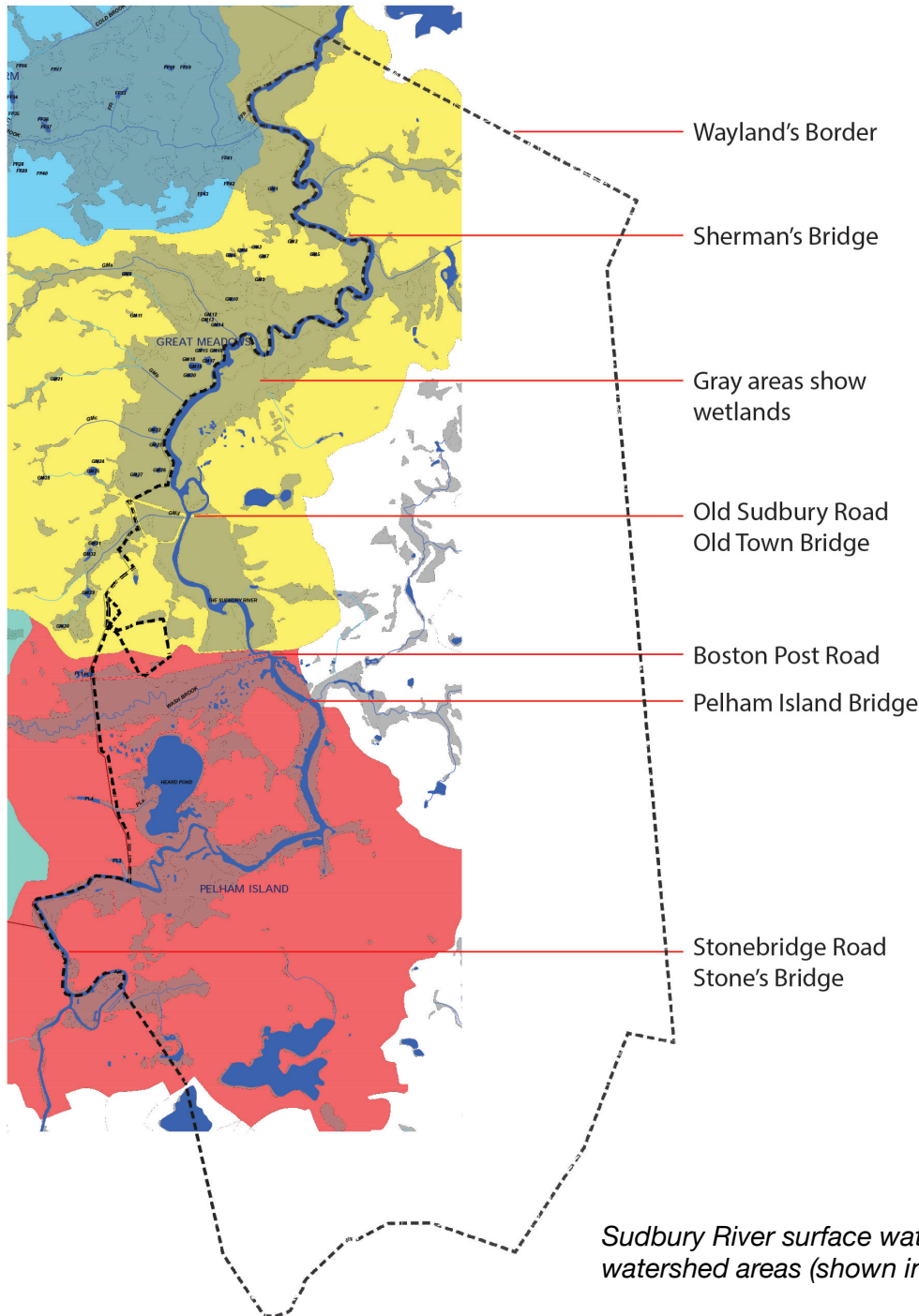
Sudbury, Assabet, Concord and Merrimack Rivers in eastern Massachusetts.

Crossing the Sudbury

How Wayland flows with the Sudbury River

A journey east-west across Massachusetts is very likely to bring a traveler to the shores of one of these rivers. The watershed areas that feed into the Sudbury are notably wide and flat, particularly in Wayland and Sudbury. Any traveler crossing the river on current-day's Boston Post Road or Old Sudbury Road will note the large stretches of flat marshy areas on the east and west of the main channel. Boaters on the river during the high-water level of any typical spring can travel far from the main channel sometimes crossing over into Heard Pond.

Residents living in the area for ten or more years have likely experienced the high floods that have been characteristic of this river system. The wide flat watershed areas easily flood, covering roads and transforming basements into outliers of the floodplain.



Crossing the Sudbury

How Wayland flows with the Sudbury River



Sherman's Bridge

Town Bridge
Canal Crossing

Boston Post Road

Pelham Island Bridge

Stone's Bridge

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

Crossing the Sudbury

How Wayland flows with the Sudbury River

The town of Sudbury was established in 1638 and incorporated in 1639. Early town records reference paths used by the Native Americans and their associated river crossings. Alfred Hudson's¹ research of Sudbury's history notes that town records dating back as far as 1641 reference bridges on the river. These early bridges would have been made of wood. Hudson suggests that the locations new settlers found were likely the crossing points used by the Native Americans, although their bridges were likely narrow and designed for foot traffic only.

The 1856 map of Wayland (previous page) shows six crossings at five locations along the river. From upstream (south) to downstream these are identified as: Stone's Bridge, Pelham Island Bridge, Boston Post Road, Town Bridge with its associated "Canal crossing" and, furthest to the north, Sherman's Bridge.

Currently there are five active bridges crossing the river at or near Wayland's borders. From the south, the first bridge is located just over the Wayland border in Framingham where the Sudbury River enters Wayland where Stonebridge Road meets Potter Road. Continuing downstream (north) there are two more river crossings within Wayland's borders, one at Pelham Island Road and another at Boston Post Road (Route 20.) Even farther to the north are the last two crossings between Wayland and Sudbury, one located in Wayland where Old Sudbury Road (Route 27) crosses the river and continues into Sudbury, and finally at the town line where Sherman Bridge Road and Lincoln Road join.

There are also three other now unused river crossings still standing in Wayland. The southernmost is Stone's Bridge off Old Stonebridge Road, and farther to the north railroad bridge that served the now the abandoned Central Massachusetts Railroad adjacent to Boston Post Road near Russell's Garden Center. Finally, near the current Wayland Golf club is the Old Town Bridge, which crossed the original course of the river adjacent to Old Sudbury Road.

Historical records of bridge crossings start with European settlers. These records show that two river crossings were used early in their population of the area—one was the crossing at the location of Stone's Bridge at the south end of Wayland and second was the crossing at the location of Town Bridge in the north.



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

¹ The Annals of Sudbury, Wayland and Maynard, Middlesex County, Massachusetts, 1638 - 1889, by Alfred Sereno Hudson, 1889

Crossing the Sudbury

How Wayland flows with the Sudbury River

Stone's Bridge

As early as 1674 a "horse bridge" is mentioned at the location where Stone's Bridge stands today at the end of Old Stonebridge Road. The dry-laid Stone's Bridge we see today was built in 1857 or 1858 when it replaced a series of wood bridges that preceded it at the same location. One of those wooden bridges was reportedly used by Colonel Henry Knox in his journey to convey cannon from Framingham to Wayland (East Sudbury) in the winter of 1775-1776.



Stone's Bridge was named for the nearby Stone family, which occupied the area for generations. Maintenance and major repairs are repeatedly noted in official accounts of both Framingham and Wayland. The narrow width and overall safety of this crossing came into question over the years, but its service as safe passage for vehicular traffic came to an end when the road surface and upper structure above the arches were damaged in August 1955 by flooding from hurricane Diane. To maintain traffic flow at the time a temporary "Bailey Bridge"² was placed over the bridge.

In August of 1956 an agreement to build a new roadway and bridge was created between the towns of Framingham and Wayland, with additional participation by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The bridge used today (just to the south of the old location) and the approaching road alterations were started in 1957.



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

² A Bailey bridge is a type of portable, prefabricated, truss bridge. It was developed in 1940-1941 during World War II.

Crossing the Sudbury

How Wayland flows with the Sudbury River

The Wayland Historical Society was influential in the effort to preserve the remains of the old Stone's Bridge. In order to reduce damage to Stone's Bridge from further flooding, the left bank of the river was widened to allow the main flow of water to pass to west of the bridge.

A photograph taken during high water level in late summer of 1953 (two years before hurricane Diane) provides a sense of the bridge's narrow width. The background of the photograph shows the far bank that was removed in 1957 to allow water to go around the bridge thereby reducing stress on the bridge.



"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.

The old bridge, seen from upstream on the Framingham side. Houses in rear are in Riverview section of Wayland. The stone arches were put together without cement, two centuries ago. In the flood, water poured over the top of the bridge, washing out the roadway and dislodging many big rocks. The metal structure on top now is a modern Bailey Bridge.

Crossing the Sudbury

How Wayland flows with the Sudbury River



Current day view of Stone's Bridge facing north, downstream, from Stonebridge Road.

Crossing the Sudbury

How Wayland flows with the Sudbury River

Town Bridge and Canal Bridge

The first European settlers in Sudbury, arriving in 1638, made their homes near the current North Cemetery on Route 27. 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, and by 1641 we find references to a bridge located nearby.

The current-day bridge at that location, now called the Old Town Bridge, which is no longer used for road traffic, is a four-arch stone bridge first built in 1848 by Josiah Russell on a site where it is supposed to be one of the earliest bridges in Middlesex County in the 1640s. Note that a bridge crossing “Bridle Point” (current day Boston Post Road) did not exist until the 1820’s.

The present bridge is a result of a total reconstruction at the same site in 1903.

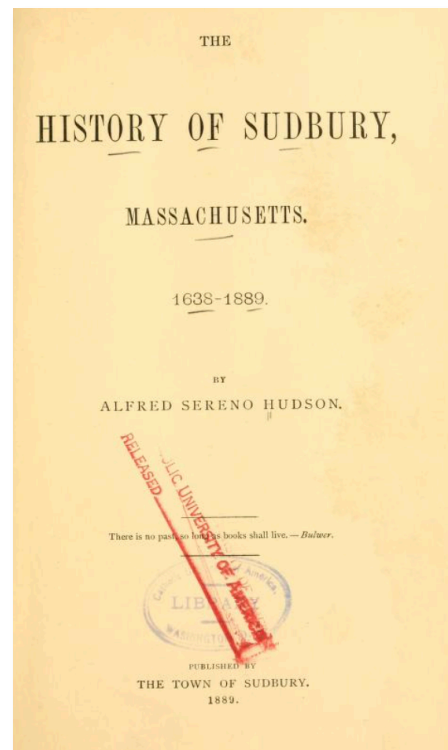


Old Town Bridge, photograph by Cutting, after the 1903 reconstruction, as viewed from downstream.

Crossing the Sudbury

How Wayland flows with the Sudbury River

Hudson writes about the crossing: *“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.” 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.”*



Canal Bridge as viewed facing southeast. To the left the roads travels over the Town Bridge leading to Wayland center, to the right the road travels to Sudbury center.

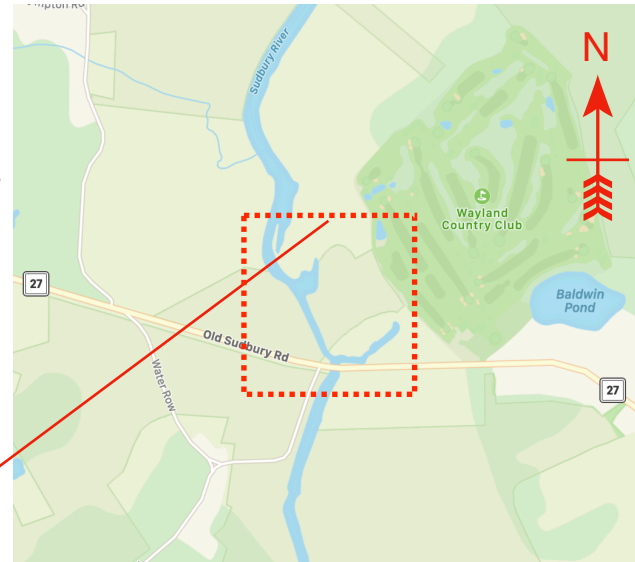
Crossing the Sudbury

How Wayland flows with the Sudbury River

The historic origin of the “canal crossing” or Canal Bridge, is not as clearly documented as that of the nearby Town Bridge. We do know that the river formed an oxbow with its apex to the east, which the Town Bridge crosses.

Some records suggest that during annual floods the river would rise sufficiently to bypass the oxbow creating an island that would cut off further passage west. Other records indicate that the bypass (known as the Canal) was manmade, allowing river traffic a straighter passage. When water was high it was difficult to cross the canal.

The stone bridge over the canal was a single arch. Like Stone’s Bridge, the Canal Bridge was severely damaged by hurricane Diane in 1955.



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

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

Crossing the Sudbury

How Wayland flows with the Sudbury River

The Sudbury River and its associated wetlands provide a lush source of food that supported Native Americans, European settlers of the 1600's through the farmers of the twentieth century. These humans built bridges to easily cross the river while keeping themselves and their goods dry. Although the region no longer supports humans in the same ways as in the past it continues to be a valuable part of the ecology and a force in our daily lives. Our river crossings today primarily support vehicular traffic. Traveling in our modern vehicles can tend to lead to deadening our awareness of our environs. Perhaps your reading of this article will foster renewed appreciation for the bridges you use to cross the Sudbury River.
