

# If not for a glacier, Steadman Street might have been riverfront property

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By George Adams Parkhurst  
*Independent Columnist*

**H**ave you seen the Merrimack River crossing Chelmsford Street at Golden Cove? Probably not, but if you had been around here a million or so years ago, give or take a few hundred thousand years, before the last glacier covered northern New England, you would have found that the Merrimack River emptied into Boston harbor, not off Cape Ann beyond Newburyport.

Archeologists tell us that, as the one-mile-thick ice blanket that had covered this area for thousands of years retreated northward, it left gravel and large rocks, some of which blocked the old river and changed its course. Instead of flowing south, as it had before the glacier, what we know as the Merrimack was forced to flow to the east.

The Middlesex canal, making travel possible from the Merrimack River at Middlesex Village (then part of Chelmsford) to Boston, followed the ancient bed of the river.

The bed of the old river formed Carolina Plain, the

sandy and swampy area extending north from Golden Cove roughly parallel to Steadman Street. It has been reported that this "riverbed" is bounded on either side by rock and gravel formations.

The sandy plain was used as an Indian camp ground as shown by the large number of Native American artifacts that have been recovered from there. Mr. Edwin L. Stearns, who lived at 16 Steadman Street for many years, amassed a collection of more than 300 arrowheads and almost as many more varied implements and decorative pieces from his backyard. Included among these are pestles and stones that were used to grind corn, grains and nuts in stone mortars, and hand-held scrapers for removing the flesh from hides. A piece of quartz may have been used as a "boiling stone," heated and dropped into water in a bark pail to warm the water. Experts have identified such things as weights for fish nets, gouges, drills, flint knives, grooved stone ax heads, chisels, hammers and ceremonial pieces. A large part of Mr. Stearns' collection of Indian artifacts is displayed at the Barrett-Byam House of the Chelmsford Historical

Society.

When he was digging out stumps of trees that had been blown down by the 1938 hurricane, Mr. Stearns discovered many of the arrowheads and small tools in groupings about a foot below the surface of the ground. He found these groupings about 20 to 25 feet apart in straight rows. Because of indications of heat and fire, he reasoned that they might have been campfires in an Indian campground. But what would have attracted them to this particular spot?

Perhaps the answer can be found in the presence of Golden Cove brook which was mentioned in old deeds 300 years ago. There is some evidence that a 40-foot beaver dam may once have created a sizable pond of clear water. If this hypothesis is correct, it could explain the existence of a campground.

It may be hard to think of the residences on the westerly side of Steadman Street as being riverfront property but that would have been the case hundreds of thousands of years ago.

*George Parkhurst is a local historian and former Chelmsford resident.*