

# A smoother trip than Route 3 can offer

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Have you driven to Boston lately? Travel on Route 3 can be a real challenge, particularly during the morning and afternoon rush hours — so called because the hours seem to rush by while traffic is immobilized. It's more like a parking lot than a super highway.

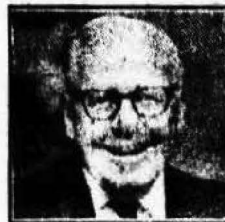
The trip to Boston was not so frustrating 180 years ago. Admittedly, you'd have to allow 12 hours for the trip each way on the Middlesex Canal but this was the scheduled time and was anticipated. However, it was not a mode of transportation you'd select for the daily commute to the office.

This man-made waterway connected the Merrimack River at its most southern point with Charleston Millpond and, by an extension, directly to Boston Harbor. Rafts of logs could be floated from the forests of New Hampshire down the Merrimack and then via the canal to Boston. The northern terminus of the canal was behind what is now Alexander's Market in Middlesex Village. (Although Middlesex Village is now part of Lowell, it was still Chelmsford until 1874, many years after the canal had been abandoned.)

Both passengers and freight were carried over this 27 mile waterway at the frightening speed of four miles per hour. Power was provided by a horse plodding along the tow path on the west side of the canal. Roads crossed the canal on bridges while streams were spanned by aqueducts since water was allowed to flow into the canal only from the Concord River in Billerica, the highest point

## The way it was

By George A.  
Parkhurst



on the route of the canal. These aqueducts were water filled trough-shaped bridges across which the boats floated.

A short section of the canal is still visible off Riverneck Road near St. Joseph's Cemetery in East Chelmsford. The original tow path is now Canal Street. An important canal reminder is the small tow house that now stands on the common in the Center village. Originally it stood at the head of the Middlesex Canal in Middlesex Village.

On January 22, 1793 John Hancock, then Governor of Massachusetts, signed a handwritten parchment document "incorporating James Sullivan, Esquire & others by the name and stile of 'The Proprietors of the Middlesex Canal'... for the purpose of cutting a canal from the waters of Merrimack river into the waters of Medford River." (John Hancock's great grandfather was Rev. Thomas Clarke, the second minister of the First Parish Church in Chelmsford.)

The first superintendent of the Canal was Loammi Baldwin, who also achieved fame as the discoverer of an apple in Wilmington

during the construction that was later given the name Baldwin.

Although construction of the canal was begun in 1794 work was not completed until 1803. It has been suggested that, before the last ice age the Merrimack River followed the route later taken by the Canal and that debris left by the glacier deflected the river to its present course to the east through Lawrence, Haverhill, and Newburyport.

The Canal owners had their best years between 1819 and 1836. Just when the golden age of the Canal seemed to be dawning, the whole scheme collapsed and rapidly sank within the next 15 years until it was finally given up as a dismal failure, with the last boat passing through it Nov. 25, 1851.

Many reasons have been given for the demise of the canal, but one was certainly the development of the Boston-Lowell railroad. Ironically, parts for the locomotives built in Lowell were transported from Boston on the canal boats.

A few years ago, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts established the Middlesex Canal Commission made up of representatives from each town through which the canal passed. This writer and Joseph Kopycinski represent Chelmsford. The State Legislature has budgeted \$45,000 to the Commission for Canal Park development, signs, etc.

*George A. Parkhurst is a Chelmsford historian whose family has lived in town since 1654.*