

The 'Venice of America', so to speak

Aug 27, 1987

"The Venice of America."

That is the cognomen that is frequently applied to the City of Lowell because of the many canals that flow through the downtown area. Although nearly all of these canals were constructed to provide power for the textile mills, there is one exception.

The Pawtucket Canal, named for the Indian tribe that inhabited this locality in the 17th century, predated the Merrimack Manufacturing Company, the first of the huge textile factories, by more than 25 years. It was designed as a transportation canal.

In 1792 a group of merchants and ship owners in Newburyport decided that, by making the Merrimack River navigable its entire length, they could improve trade with communities in central New Hampshire and thus increase the business of their port. The biggest impediment to navigation was the Pawtucket Falls in what was then East Chelmsford where, in a short distance, the river drops 32 feet. (There was, of course, no dam at Pawtucket Falls in those days.)

Logs, made into rafts in the northern forests, were floated down the Merrimack until they reached East Chelmsford (now Lowell). Here the rafts had to be broken up and reassembled below the falls. Other goods had to be transported around the rapids in wagons before continuing their trip downriver.

Governor John Hancock signed a charter in 1792 establishing a company known as

The way It was

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the Proprietors of the Locks and Canals, that was granted permission to build a canal and control the water rights. The company constructed the Pawtucket Canal, beginning just above the falls and, following an existing brook, entered the Concord River not far from where it flows into the Merrimack, thus circumventing the rapids. It was 1½ miles long and cost \$50,000. Four locks permitted the passage of rafts and boats.

The first boat passed through in 1797 and, because this was one of the first canals opened in this country, several hundred people assembled to view the unusual event. History tells us that "they stood upon the walls of the first lock and the banks of the canal. The directors and other gentlemen invited by them to take the trip were on board the boat.

Scarcely had they entered the first lock when the sides suddenly gave way.

"The water, bursting upon the spectators with great violence, carried many down stream. Infants were separated from their

parents, wives from their husbands, young ladies from their gallants, and men, women, timber, and broken boards and planks were seen promiscuously floating in the water. Some had their clothes partially, others almost entirely torn from them. Mothers were shrieking for their lost children, husbands swimming in search of their wives and daughters; paleness sat on the countenance and anxiety filled the hearts of those on shore for the safety of their friends in the water. All, at length, came safely to land without any material injury. Thus ended the amusement of that memorable day."

In later years the Pawtucket Canal was enlarged and served as a source of water for the many power canals.

If you have taken the present day National Park "Mill and Canal Tour," you have traveled by boat on the Pawtucket Canal from the Swamp Locks upstream to the beginning of the canal at the river.

(By the way, this very interesting and historically enlightening tour is strongly recommended to any who have not yet tried it.)

Another tour would take you down the Pawtucket Canal, under Central Street, to a point near the Hilton Hotel.

Thus we see that Chelmsford, in its day, had one of the earliest canals in the country.

And, that's the way it was.

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