

## Bridge II

by Bruce E. Ingmire

Last week "Seacoast Chronicle" described the building of the Piscataqua Bridge in 1794 over Great Bay between Cedar Point, Dover and Newington. Until the Piscataqua Bridge was built, the land trip from Maine to Boston required trips by ferry across the Piscataqua, the Merrimack River, and the Charles River into Boston. The trip took days versus the hours we can make that same trip today.

The prohibitive amount of time for land transportation had helped to maintain the dominance of coastal transportation by ship until the American Revolution. But ship travel was at the mercy of weather and winds and it too could result in a long transportation time. Much of the goods were perishable and improvements were needed.

Before the Piscataqua Bridge was completed, goods traveled by land from Maine, over the Cocheco near Berwick, through Dover, around Great Bay to Durham, Newmarket, across the Swampscot River, Stratham, Exeter, and on toward Newburyport where travelers crossed the Merrimack and then onto the Charles crossing into Boston.

During the 1790's impressment of American seamen, capture of ships by the French and English made shipping even riskier. Thus land travel became more viable. By 1800, the Jefferson embargo of New England made travel by water virtually impossible. These developments helped to make the Piscataqua Bridge a very important decision and lucrative investment. For a number of years, the Piscataqua Bridge remained the longest bridge in the US.

Once Timothy Palmer's Piscataqua Bridge was completed, the long trip around Great Bay was no longer required and the distance to Boston shortened by many miles. The citizens of Newington built Fox Point Road to shorten the route through the town. The signs in Newington today mark the old Post Road. In the same period of the development of interior highways, Palmer's Merrimack Bridge at Newburyport over Deer Island and the Charles River Bridge at Boston made the trip easier and reduced the costs of land transportation.

Starting in 1799, proprietors organized the completion of the NH Turnpike in 1803. In all these cases the public was served by private enterprise. The costs were held down, liability insurance was not a factor. Many proprietors also served in the legislature and it did not cost the proprietors to lobby for a law that made truckers libel for damage to the bridge caused by over weight wagons.

In the 1800's, private initiative maintained costs and provided public services. In a day of huge government expenditures, it is instructive to understand that in the earliest days of this nation, private enterprise held the costs of services. We need to consider and experiment with this approach because it may help in reducing costs for government. It was only a century ago that government took over all these services.

The rivers, Great Bay and the tidal action from the Atlantic worked against the bridge. Constant repairs were required but the bridge was still a lucrative enterprise because the Turnpike from Concord still was busy with traffic. The Tavern on Goat Island was so well known that that central location served as a point for Fourth of July gatherings and other national celebrations. It is not difficult to imagine the scene as the toll was collected on the Dover side, then the wagon would proceed across the first section of the bridge. Many a driver would stop at the Tavern for refreshment and ask the best price being paid for the commodity that he was carting. As the driver recovered from his trip, a herd of cattle or Merino Sheep might be taken across the bridge on its way to the port of Portsmouth.

Newington served as a bread basket for the seacoast. That tradition of farming can still be envisioned as one drives along Fox Point Road or down Newington Road despite the abandoned air base that divided the town nearly a half century ago.

Cyrus Frink who had been a Supervisor on Major Zenos Witing's crew from Connecticut, pur-

chased the Richard Downing farm and settled in Newington. Frink married Abigail Nutter and in a short period of time added to the size of his Fox Point farm. The Frinks had nine children. This was called toll farming where a fee was paid the proprietors and the Frinks kept the remaining profits.

The Piscataqua Bridge from Noble's Island to Kittery was built in 1822. Later that bridge was transformed for the railroad that went to Portland. This bridge and later a railroad significantly reduced rates for the freight and time of travel from Portland to Boston. Eventually it eliminated the trip around to Berwick then Dover.

Newington served as an important link for the upland farmers. After a trip from the north or west, they could find overnight accommodations. The farmers of Newington raised produce and dairy products that women of Newington used to create the hearty cuisine that became known statewide. Today many of their recipes are recorded part of Drover's Inn hospitality.

The Frinks raised the produce that was served in the Tavern. After Cyrus's death, Frink sons, Darius and Elias Frink operated the bridge. Eventually competition ended the dominate position of the bridge, and the bridge was sold to the Frinks for \$2,000.

Elias Frink's daughters Mary and Abigail served the foods that their mother and grandmother had made popular. The Frink farm at Fox Point burned and the property was eventually sold to Dr. F. E. Langdon. The Victorian buildings from the Langdon Farm still rest of the property which now serves as a Newington town park. The ancient Newington bridge abutment to Rock Island now serves as a town boat launch.

Several ice flows caused major damage to the bridge. The account book of Frink's work on behalf of the proprietors of the bridge has been photocopied and can be seen at Strawberry Banke, Inc. The first that caused major damage was on March 8, 1830 when the entire portion of the bridge from Newington to Rock Island was washed away. In the fall of 1854, a storm washed away part of the bridge. On February 8, 1855, bridge sections were demolished and the decision to abandon the bridge was arrived at by the Frinks.

The advent of the railroads spelled the end of the usefulness of the Piscataqua Bridge. A second railroad, the Portsmouth and Concord which went from Portsmouth south around Great Bay to Rockingham Junction and then on to Concord took a great deal of the traffic from the Turnpike and Piscataqua Bridge.

The railroads were progress and in those days before the civil war, mass transportation was the vogue. The introduction of the automobile changed that and only now are we Americans beginning to believe that mass transportation should have remained as a viable form of transportation in the fight to reduce pollution.

The Piscataqua Bridge is a part of our seacoast history, the picture of our agricultural past. One wonders if the threat to the demise of the bridge had occurred in our day, would it have brought out a group of enthusiasts, the Friends of the Piscataqua Bridge? They might have organized a fund raising effort to preserve a no longer viable part of our history. In the case of the bridge, the cost of maintaining it and modernizing it to present standards, would have been prohibitive. There is a place for preserving our past but there is also a place for history and written words to bring back a past that can not be preserved. More about the bridges from Bloody Point to Dover Point next week.