

A Brief Concord River History

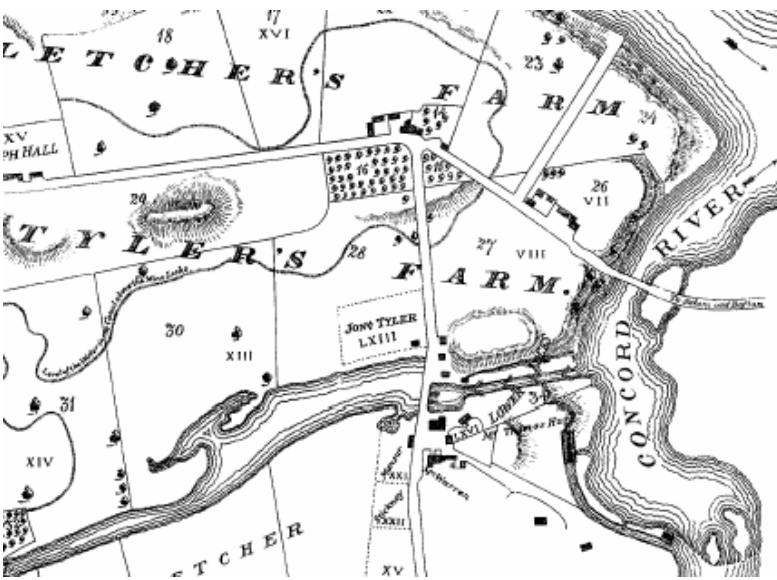
Native Americans

Lined by fertile lands and dotted with several good fishing sites, the lower stretch of the Concord River was at one time inhabited by large numbers of Native Americans, well before European settlers made their way across the Atlantic and inland from the coast. Seventeenth-century historian Daniel Goodkin claimed that before contact there were thousands of “Wamesit” making semi-permanent residence on the east side of the Concord, where it met the Merrimack. There they planted corn in the rich alluvial soil, fished “for salmon, shad, lamprey-eels, sturgeon, bass, and diverse others,” and hunted the reportedly abundant game in the surrounding woods. This group was one of two tribes in the area, with another, the “Pawtucket,” at Pawtucket Falls upstream on the Merrimack River. Both belonged to the Pennacook Confederacy, and their settlements swelled and shrank in size seasonally, as native visitors came and went with the migration cycles of the anadromous fish. In the 17th century, however, they were killed or run out of the river valley by fearful settlers. By 1726, native rights to the land along the Concord were nonexistent.

East Chelmsford & Tewksbury

Throughout the eighteenth century, the people of East Chelmsford, now downtown Lowell, were engaged primarily in farming and fishing. Joseph Fletcher and Jonathan Tyler owned the land abutting the Concord River on the west side, some of which they planted or managed as woodlot (see Map 1). On the east side, in Tewksbury, was the “Old Yellow House,” a tavern and hotel where the Wamesit village once stood and where Saints Memorial Medical Center stands today.

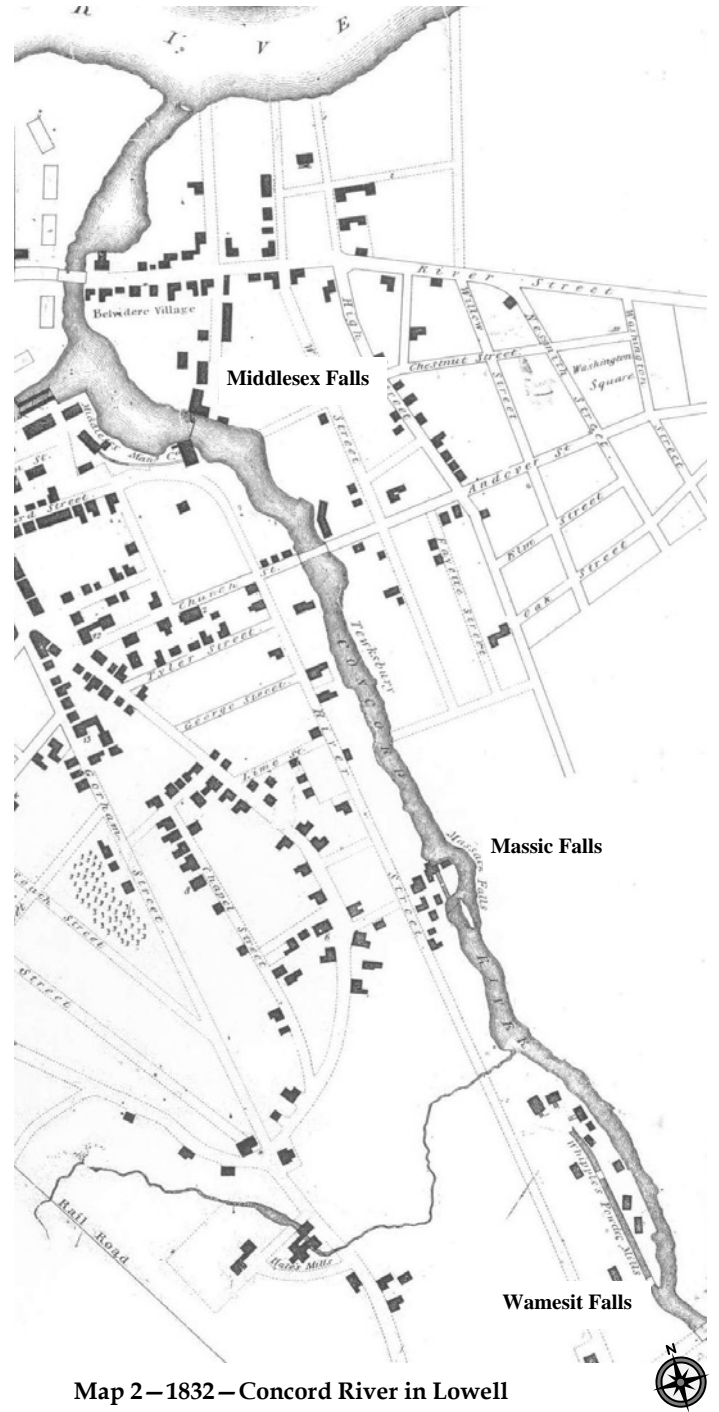
Decades before textile manufacturing harnessed the Merrimack River, and throughout the antebellum era, industry made a definite mark on the Concord River as well as River Meadow Brook. Three natural falls along the river—Wamesit, Massic, and Middlesex—became focal points for businesses producing and manufacturing a variety of items such as gunpowder, leather, bolts, paint, wool, flannel, shovels, mattresses, and electricity (see Map 2).



Map 1- 1821- Detail of J. G. Hale's 1821 "A Plan of Farms"

Wamesit Falls & Centennial Island

In 1790, Moses Hale constructed a fulling mill just below where Gorham Street crossed River Meadow Brook (which, also, became known as Hale Brook), as well as a saw mill and grist mill on the other side. Hale brought the **first power carding machine** in Middlesex County to the fulling mill in 1801 and, a decade later, constructed a second dam on the brook to harness more power. In 1818, he also erected five or six buildings on the Concord River at Wamesit Falls to manufacture gunpowder, work that was overseen by **Oliver Whipple**. Whipple bought seven acres of land on the river, built a house and powder mill of his own, and became a partner with Hale. In 1821, Whipple



Map 2 - 1832 - Concord River in Lowell

married Sophronia Hale, and constructed a canal fed by the Concord. He bought large additions to his original property at mid-decade, extended the canal, and in 1827 bought out all the other owners of the **Hale Powder Mills**. Other canal extensions created an island today known as **Centennial Island**.

Skating on the River

"We were closer to Hale's Brook. And we used to go down there and ice skate... If you go down Carter Street, and took a left up onto Livingston Street, and when you got right up the crest of Livingston Street, there was a street that went down to Hale's Brook. And that was Newhall Street. And that's where we played. That's where we skated."

From Elinor Haines Interview (b. 1930).

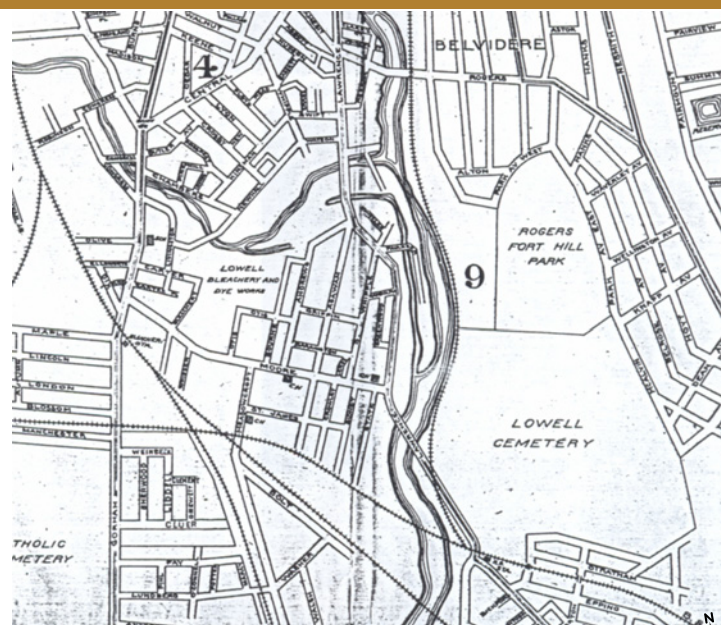
Recycling from the River

"So there was always somebody sitting, looking out and watching the river. And when they saw a big log, or something that would come down, they'd holler to one another, 'There's a log on the river!' And they had a little boat, and the boat was called 'Little Eva.' And they'd go down. Two of them would go down and jump on Little Eva, and go out and get the big log of wood and bring it in. And then of course that's what they had for their firewood."

From Louise Szelest Interview (b. 1914).

Lowell was incorporated in 1826, as the textile industry moved in and the “Belvidere Village” of Tewksbury on the east bank of the Concord was annexed to the city in 1834. By 1837, the local population had grown 800% to 18,010, but much of the housing was concentrated north and west of the Concord River. In 1841, with 43 acres of land deeded by Oliver Whipple, **Lowell Cemetery was sited as a park** along the east bank (see Map 3). The peace and exclusive sanctity of the place was threatened later, however, when the new Lowell and Andover line of the Boston & Maine Railroad cut off the burial ground’s foot entrance near Wamesit Falls. Finished in 1874, the railroad tracks split from the Boston & Maine line to run north across Lawrence Street, continued between the river and the cemetery, along the proposed route of the **Concord River Greenway**, and turned west to cross the Concord before the Church Street Bridge, with a terminus on Central Street at the **Rialto Building**.

Industrial production on the Concord River was most dynamic and sustained during the nineteenth century on and behind Centennial Island at Wamesit Falls. Oliver Whipple had sold his water power rights and mill property to E.B. Patch in 1863, and Patch sold the same to the Wamesit Power Company two years later. The businesses in the area varied over the next few decades and produced numerous goods. In 1868, from south to north, the island hosted a sawmill, chemical works, C.H. Crowther’s Dye House, the Faulkner, Chase, and Stott Textile Mills, and the American Bolt Company. By 1905, from south to north again, there were the Lladnek Dye and Print Works, the Waterhead Corduroy Mill, the E. Hapgood & Son Mattress factory, the Faulkner Woolen Mills, the Sterling Woolen Mills, and still the American Bolt Company. A wooden box factory moved in between the corduroy mill and mattress factory in the 1920s, and E. Hapgood was replaced by Heinze Electric at mid-century. The Faulkner and Chase Mills had burned in a fire in 1880, but were rebuilt and combined into one company in 1886, and operated as the American Woolen Mills from 1906 to 1932. The Sterling Mills remained in operation from 1846 to 1937, followed on the site by the Supreme Parlor Furniture Company from 1947-1957. Also, the Waterhead Corduroy Mill was replaced by a furniture warehouse and store in 1942. Today, only the Waterhead Mills building stands mid-island, and brick remnants of the Sterling Woolen Mills are visible at the north end of the island, next to the **Centennial Island Hydroelectric** facility.



Map 3—1908 –Southern Reach of Concord River in Lowell

waste that would otherwise have been dumped in a river. His son, Charles, succeeded him in the business but leased the property to William Walker & Sons in 1864, which operated a textile mill there. The Crossley Manufacturing Company followed and made indigo blue flannels, ladies dress goods, and fine cloakings, though it ceased operations in 1891. By 1896 the property had been sold from Annie Richmond to the **Wamesit Power Company**. In 1924, it was owned and used by the Lowell Electric Light Company, although by the mid-1930s the original building and dam were gone.

Fishing in the River

“Even in those days we would swim in the canals, but we never ate [the fish]. We knew enough...as we saw the dyes coming down the canal, and there was also American Hide and Leather Company, which dumped all of its refuse from the canal, into the canal and into the river, directly in, which were the remains of the hides of the cows ...The smell, the scent was just unbearable.”

From Robert Duffy Interview (b. 1940).

“We used to actually fish right beyond the rapids, right beyond the Dizzy Bridge [just upstream from Lawrence Street Bridge]. And we used to go over the canal, and there was a bridge over the canal. That’s gone too. It was like a concrete slab. And my brother Pete and I used to go and fish there quite a bit... we’d mostly catch kibby and carp. It’s the kind of fish that are in there now, it’s so clean you know ... We used to use corn a lot. Corn or worms ... We used to just throw [the fish] back in. It was just for the sport of it. You didn’t eat it. You didn’t eat the stuff out of the river back then. They used to say it was contaminated.”

From Dick Moloney Interview (b. 1959).

Massic Falls between Rogers & Church Streets

About a thousand feet downstream, where the Concord River is squeezed between granite boulders and crashes over Massic Falls, there was another early site for manufacturing. Fresh from an apprenticeship to a blacksmith, Nathan Ames, Sr., established Ames & Fisher Iron Works on the western bank in 1791, to make hoes, shovels, edge tools, and wrought-iron parts for mill machinery. In 1810, however, a fire destroyed the works, a common calamity for early nineteenth-century industrialists, and Ames moved his family to Dedham, Massachusetts, where he set up a nail factory. Within a year he returned to Lowell and rebuilt his shop on the old site. He transferred the business to his namesake, Nathan, Jr., in 1829, but the son relinquished control of the iron works and moved to the Chicopee River in western Massachusetts to open another shop. In 1834, Perez Richmond established the Richmond Mills at the falls to produce paper and cotton batting, using textile

Swimming in the River

“And so we used to go swimming here at the Concord River [on the west side, near Church Street]. And then we used to swim across the river and things like that ...And both the gals and the guys used to go down there. And as I said, that was our beach. There was a tree in the river. We had ropes. We’d swing off the tree. There was a railroad bridge going across the river. And on the other side of the river was, on the Perry Street side, was the Mass. Electrical Company. And the train that they had there was like a little freight train...And over here on Church Street was huge mounds of coal. We used to go there. The train used to cross the railroad bridge, cross the river with the coal, and bring it back. The Electrical Light Company at that time, they burned coal...And so once we got to know how to swim ... we’d go on the bridge, we’d cross the bridge, railroad, and we’d jump off the bridge.”

From Al Abrahamian Interview (b. 1930).

Trash

“Oh, well the first time I ever remember going in the Concord River, my Uncle Jim lived up on Pleasant Street. It was a few streets...down from my house, and a few streets up from the river, two or three. And I remember going down the river with him, and he had his trash with him, you know, trash for a couple of days. And he took the trash, right in the river, right off the bridge. And down there, there were washing machines, I mean sticking up out of the water. That was, people used to just do it...And no one batted an eye. That’s just what everybody used to do to throw it into the river, throw all of their trash in there...That was right on Rogers Street, right off the bridge.”

From Dick Moloney Interview (b. 1959).

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also saw a new area of manufacturing develop along the Concord River’s east bank, between Massic and Wamesit Falls. That part of Lowell was comparatively slow in getting started with industry, although some of the mills and other businesses remained in operation well into the 1930s or even longer. Just south of the Church Street Bridge was a coal yard and the **Lowell Electric Light Company**, incorporated in 1881 but later moved to the Perry Street location in 1890. When the utility expanded to include a station at the old Richmond Mills site, it had a coal yard on that side of the river too, near where the Lowell and Andover railroad line crossed over. The building and dam at Massic Falls as well as the west-side coal yard were gone, however, by 1936.

The Perry Street facility was also closed at the end of the decade, and used later for warehousing. That was the story of U.S. Bobbin and Shuttle Company as well as the Hooper Knitting Company, established in the 1880s and closed in the 1930s, leaving additional buildings leased for storage space. On the other hand, American Hide and Leather Company operated on the east bank from 1900 to 1956, and the American Mason Safety Tread Company did not close until 1968. The tannery was a leader in the leather and shoe industry as well as a major employer in the area. Today that land is the site for **Bradford Industries**.

Middlesex Falls

One of the other important sites for industrial production on the Concord River was a few thousand feet downstream from the Richmond Mills, at Middlesex Falls, just above the Pawtucket Canal where the **DoubleTree Hotel** and Lower Locks parking garage are today. John Goulding settled there in 1812 and, in partnership with Jonathan Knowles, operated a carding and spinning mill where a grist mill and saw mill once stood. Goulding built another mill on the western side of the canal to make machinery and sold his first mill to Thomas Hurd in 1818. In 1821, Hurd erected a larger building to expand operations and dug a canal off the river just above a pre-existing wooden dam. The new building was destroyed by fire in 1825 and rebuilt the next year, but Hurd went bankrupt in 1828. Two years later the Middlesex Manufacturing Company purchased the property, which it leased out until 1836 (see Map 4). The company saw hard times after World War I and again started leasing out various parts of the property. The Ipswich Mills came and went between 1920 and 1928, and other occupants included Bay State Paint, New England Handbag, and Warren Leather Board. Then, in 1956, the buildings were torn down and the area paved for a parking lot. The wooden dam was reinforced over the years and became known as the Middlesex Dam. In the 1980s, the dam was breached by flooding. While helping improve water quality and opening passage for anadromous fish, the breach provides a class III rapid for our spring **Concord River White Water Rafting** program.



Map 4 –1908 – Northern Reach of the Concord to Confluence

In 1821, directly across the river from Hurd’s mills, on the east bank, **Winthrop Howe** razed a previously constructed sawmill and erected a woolen mill in its place. He carried on a business of hand-loom flannel production there until 1826, when a fire destroyed the mill. He sold the property and water privileges to Harrison Howe, who rebuilt the mill and resumed the production of flannels with power looms. The business changed hands several times during the 1830s, and in 1835 it was owned by three investors from Boston, operating as the Belvidere Flannel Manufacturing Company. That enterprise went bankrupt at mid-century, and Belvidere agent Charles Stott formed a partnership with Walter Farnsworth to run the mill as Farnsworth and Stott. Fire destroyed the old flannel mill and a newer mill in subsequent years, yet the two men formed the **Belvidere Woolen**

Manufacturing Company out of the ashes and built a new brick flannel mill in 1854, as well as a second mill on the Wamesit power canal at River Meadow Brook in 1862. Production increased after the Civil War but they began leasing space to the White Brothers & Company Tannery in 1896. By the 1930s, the Howe Street property had been razed. Today, the site is the Davidson Street parking lot which will be the downtown terminus of the **Concord River Greenway Park**.

Concord and Merrimack River Confluence

A group of Boston merchants who became known as the Boston Associates (early members included Francis Cabot Lowell, Patrick Tracy Jackson, and Nathan Appleton) recognized the power of water as an energy source for textile mills. The Boston Associates’ first land purchase in the Merrimack Valley was Nathan Tyler’s farm in 1821, with its east boundary at the Merrimack and Concord confluence. On this site in 1841, these early corporate investors later established the **Massachusetts Mills**, which absorbed the **Prescott Mills** in 1847. The business faced declining profits throughout the early twentieth century, however, and ceased production in 1928. Several years later the millyard was purchased by the Lowell Industrial Development Company and a variety of businesses moved in, including a ballroom, bowling alley, several printers, two shoe factories, stamp works, and a couple of hosiery mills, all of which closed within a few decades. Some of the Massachusetts Mills buildings have since been converted into condominiums.

Neighbors and Workers

Lowell’s growth in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was driven by expanding opportunities for paid labor and, more so than most other cities in the Northeast or Midwest, Lowell quickly became a destination for large but changing waves of immigrants. During the rise and expansion of industry the biggest change in the resident population along the river was a shift in the origin of these foreigners. Almost all of the immigrants who came to one of the three neighborhoods before the 1890s were from Ireland or England, with smaller numbers from Canada and Scotland. By 1920, newcomers in the second wave of immigrants were from Poland, Lithuania, Portugal (primarily the Madeira, Azores, and Cape Verde Islands), and, after World War I, Armenia (see Table 1). Both waves of immigrants were relatively young, most of them under thirty-five years of age, and they quickly found employment in the local mills and factories.

Proportion and Change in Immigrants, 1880-1920 (U.S. Census Manuscripts 1880 and 1920).			
Place of Origin*	1880	1920	Change
Ireland	61%	37%	-24%
England	18%	16%	-2%
Canada	14%	11%	-3%
Scotland	3%	3%	0%
Poland	-	12%	+12%
Lithuania	-	7%	+7%
Portugal	-	6%	+6%
Armenia	-	4%	+4%

* Totals for each census year do not add up to 100 percent because not all countries of origin are included in the list.

Table 1 – Lower Concord River Neighborhoods – Place of Origin

Ethnic Diversity

“I remember I was born in the 245 Fayette Street area, which is Lower Belvidere. And right behind the house where I lived was the river. Those are my first memories of the river. And we lived in a triplex. Actually I remember it was an incline having to go down the hill. And on the left was the French family, the Poes. We were the Polish family, Rachel Stanowicz in the middle, and on the right I remember the Kelleys, the Irish family. And on the top of the incline we had a black family, the Edmonds. And they were the only family that had a car. And I don’t think, it wasn’t that we were poor. It was because everything was in walking distance. We used to walk everywhere.”

From Mary Louise Looney Interview (b. 1949).

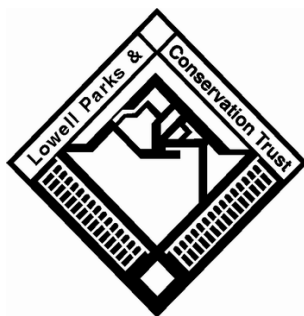
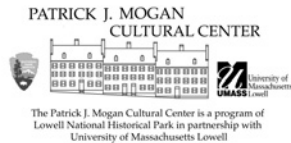
Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust

The Trust was founded in 1990 and is a private non-profit membership organization. Our mission is to improve the quality of life for the people of Lowell through the creation, conservation, and preservation of parks, open spaces, and special places. Overall, our programs focus in four major areas: land protection, greenway development, urban forestry, and environmental education.

Text for the brochure is based on research conducted in 2004-2005 by Professor Chad Montrie, University of Massachusetts Lowell. The research project included a series of interviews and oral histories as well as archival research. The oral history interviews with river-neighborhood residents will be used to create interpretive signage along the river path that will be developed as the Concord River Greenway Park. The Concord River Greenway Park, a large community project to preserve land along the east bank of the Lowell portion of the Concord River is currently under development. The research will also help us demarcate sites and stops with special views of historic structures and other important urban and ecological features.

The Trust would like to recognize and thank Martha Mayo, UMass Lowell Center for Lowell History; Christine Brown, project volunteer; and all those who were interviewed and shared their Concord River stories with us. We would also like to thank the Lowell Historical Society for use of the map images.

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Please consider becoming a member and supporting the Concord River Greenway Project.

Donations may be mailed to:

Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust

P. O. Box 7162

Lowell, MA 01852

978-934-0030

www.lowelllandtrust.org

info@lowelllandtrust.org

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