

Rocks Bridge

Over the years Rocks Bridge (also known as the Rocks Village Bridge), a West Newbury icon, has been more appreciated for its history and aesthetics than its functionality as a major thoroughfare. Main Street and its east/west parallels in Town formed the framework for transportation while, according to the [Massachusetts Historical Commission](#), “[n]orth/south routes, striking out perpendicularly from the Merrimack, intersected these roads haphazardly, making travel in this direction difficult. Thus the bridge was “[n]ever an important route across the Merrimack....” It has been preserved as such to present day.

On [June 14, 1791](#), Massachusetts’ legislature authorized construction of the Merrimack Bridge between Rocks Village in Haverhill and the area at the bottom of what was described in the [1729](#) West Parish map as Ferry Lane, named for the ferry at Holt’s Rocks operated by John Swett, Jr., and his descendants since 1711. The bridge was completed on [November 26, 1795](#).

According to a [Rocks Village history](#), the original bridge was “900 ft. long, 30 ft. wide, ‘with an arch 140 feet long over a good depth of water.’” The crowned central arch contained a 30’ long draw, which, under the authorizing legislation, was to be opened without cost to river commerce. Upon its opening, it was the longest span across the Merrimack.

The bridge was prone to breakage from the start—a tradition [continued to this day](#), now thanks in the main to truck traffic. In 1813, a drove of 100 cattle on one of the arches broke through the bridge. In 1818, when pummeled by 2’ thick ice dams accompanying a spring freshet that rose the river by 21’, the bridge washed out to sea. A ferry was again in operation until 1828, when the rebuilt bridge (narrowed to the current 24’ width) was claimed to be “considered by the best judges, as [surpassed by no other Bridge](#) ever invented....”

In 1857, when Wallace T. George served as tollkeeper/draw operator/shoemaker on the north side, the bridge enjoyed its [best year of toll receipts](#). It was, however, never as profitable as its local incorporators, responsible for maintenance and repairs, had hoped. By act of the state legislature in 1868, [Essex County took over all toll bridges](#), ending toll collections. The Rocks Bridge proprietors were paid \$4,000, roughly a third of their investment, in the taking. The county

decreed that West Newbury, Haverhill, and Amesbury were equally responsible for maintenance.

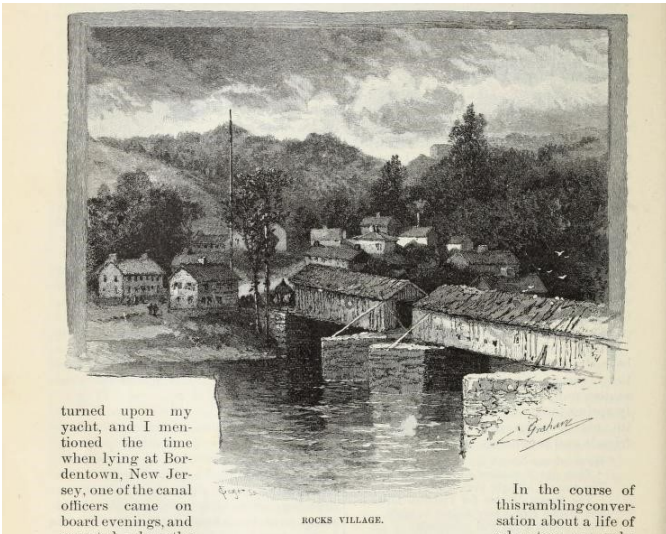
[Successive construction projects](#) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries added iron and steel, replacing the old covered wooden structure described in the Whittier poem *The Countess*: “Over the wooded northern ridge/ Between its houses brown/ To the dark tunnel of the bridge/ The street comes straggling down.” In 1873 the county funded a new iron draw, and the towns paid for other repairs. The draw was again reconstructed and relocated in 1882; the following year saw replacement of two wooden spans. Repairs and replacements continued, until in 1913 the county (having assumed full responsibility due in part to [West Newbury’s unwillingness to pay](#) for the bridge) replaced the last three covered wooden spans on the West Newbury side.

After I-495 and I-95 were in place, in the 1970s questions arose about the need for bridge repairs—including whether the crossing might be relocated or remodeled to serve as a connector for the two interstates. As protection, Haverhill’s end of the bridge was incorporated into the [Rocks Village Historic District](#) in 1974.

At West Newbury’s [June 19, 1979 Annual Town Meeting](#), it was “[v]oted with one opposed, to direct the Board of Selectmen to go on public record with agencies such as the Massachusetts Department of Public Works, the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission, and ... any other appropriate persons and/ or institutions that the Town of West Newbury is strongly opposed to the replacement of the Rocks Village Bridge at any location other than its present site, and that the Town of West Newbury is strongly opposed to the replacement or reconstruction of the said bridge at the same site in any way that would significantly alter its current historical and architectural value or in any way that would allow a significantly altered pattern of traffic usage on the bridge or its approach through West Newbury.”

Between 2013-14, the state rebuilt the bridge, preserving the design and the draw style. Of the 44 turntable movable span bridges in MassHighway’s database, [Rocks Bridge is “the oldest](#) of them all, ... still operated by hand.” For Captain Red’s stories about the bridge, [click here](#).

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turned upon my yacht, and I mentioned the time when lying at Bordentown, New Jersey, one of the canal officers came on board evenings, and

In the course of this rambling conversation about a life of

Source: [Harpers New Monthly Magazine Vol. 66 \(1883\)](#)



Rocks Bridge

Source: [West Newbury Town Website](#)



Rocks Bridge, Haverhill, Mass.

Source: [Rocks Village Website](#)

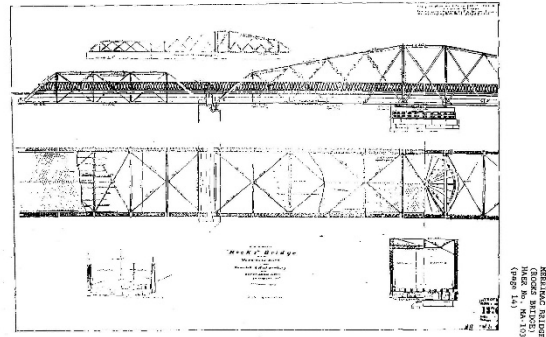


Figure 5.
Plan for spans 2 and 3 of Merrimac (Rocks) Bridge, Boston Bridge Works, 1882.
(Massachusetts Department of Public Works bridge files.)

Source: [US NPS History of Rocks Bridge](#)



Bridge Draw Open 2017 Source: [WN Historical Commission](#)



Bridge in 2016 Source: [WN Historical Commission](#)



West Newbury Bicentennial Logo Source: [West Newbury Town Website](#)