New Bedford Streets; A Piece of Americana: Middle Street

Welcome to our fourth installment of New Bedford Streets; A Piece of Americana. I invite you to read up on the history behind William Street, Kempton Street and Ashley Boulevard. As usual, I'd like to re-iterate the importance of reader feedback, correction, and contributions. In the process of exploring these streets, I try to confirm or validate statements and dates by finding multiple sources. Unfortunately, if all those sources are making their statement based on an older, incorrect source, and there isn't any dissenting information available, there's no way to know otherwise. So by all means, please join in.

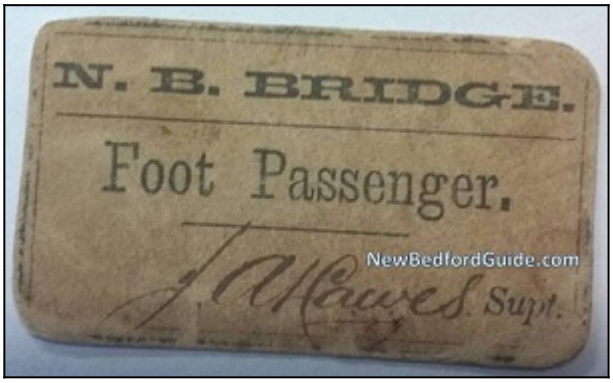
In addition, when trying to validate some statements, often there is very little to no information available. I haven't decided which is worse – finding one source, or finding multiple sources, but not knowing if they were all based on an inaccuracy. So help from local historians, those who remember, oral histories and anecdotes handed down through the generations, people with private collections, and even know-it-alls help!

In this installment, we are going to explore a street steeped in history and importance. Not only is it one of the oldest streets in the city, it was at one time the lifeblood of the the city and a connector between Bedford Village and Oxford Village (Fairhaven): *Middle Street*.

Middle street wasn't always named so. It was originally called Bridge Street, since it connected to the New Bedford/Fairhaven bridge. If you were to fly low – in let's say a helicopter – straight along Middle street in New Bedford, you would arrive on Bridge Street in Fairhaven, the original name of Middle Street! Today where Middle street in New Bedford would have

connected to the bridge is cut off by the Elm Street parking garage and the John F. Kennedy Memorial Highway or Route 18. After you pass the current bridge and over the causeway, this street turns into Huttleston Avenue. However, if you were to bear right before that at the Pope Island Marina and somehow drove across the water, you would eventually be driving on Bridge Street in Fairhaven.

Fairhaven/New Bedford Bridge; A slight Diversion

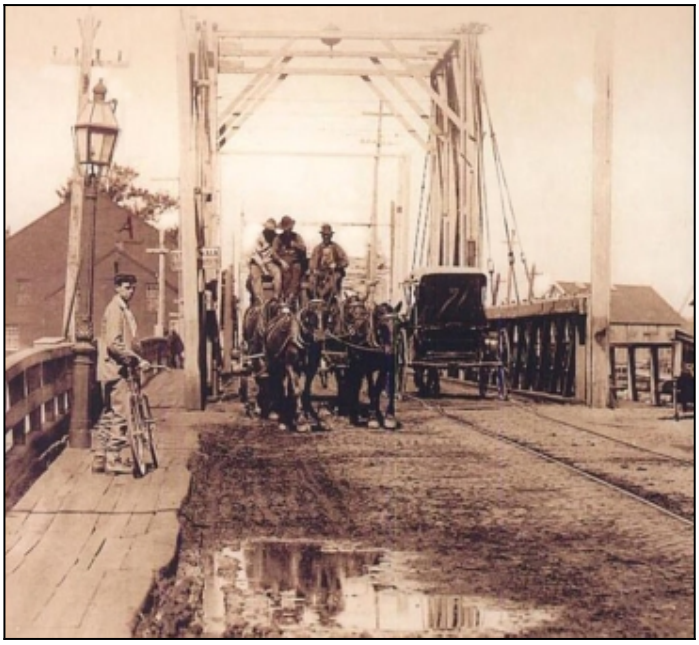


Today's bridge seems to serve more as an interruption to traffic, so let's stick with that theme and take a slight diversion at the monster responsible for the dubbing of Middle Street. The original bridge was was built under William Rotch's direction (and assisted by many others) in 1796 and served as a toll bridge. The fare for crossing the bridge in 1800 is known since we not only have quite a few mentions of it in historical documents, but tickets can still be found. Here is what it cost in 1800 to cross the bridge:

- *4 cents for each foot passenger.*
- *6 cents for a foot passenger pushing a wheelbarrow or hand cart.*
- *6 additional cents for a dozen head of cattle, swine, horses, or sheep.*
- *12 cents for each person and a horse.*
- *18 cents for each sleigh drawn by one horse, and 6 cents for each additional horse.*
- *36 cents for each coach, wagon or sled or other carriage of burden.*

Keep in mind at this time, Fairhaven was still part of New Bedford. Fairhaven wouldn't incorporate until later in 1812. In 1807, a great tide came in and swept the bridge away. Of course being a major thoroughfare a new bridge replaced the

old. Alas, it lasted only 8 years before heavy winds blew it down.



New Bedford/Fairhaven Bridge in the 1800s.

On September 29, 1815 a massive storm slammed into the region and raised tides by over 10 feet. The devastation and damage was catastrophic. Hundreds of homes and businesses were wiped away, ships including the Lagoda were stove in, damaged or destroyed. The storm coincided with high tide and came in so quickly that people had to abandon their stations. This did irreparable damage in terms of the loss of historical documents, account books, logbooks, city and town records, and more. The flooding waters were said to reach all the way to County Street.

New Englanders, known for their stubbornness, thrift and industriousness licked their wounds and got to rebuilding, and simply put up a third bridge in 1819. The curse seemed to lift and the bridge got to it’s 50th birthday in 1869, before nature reared her mighty head and another gale blew the bridge down yet a fourth time! In the bridge’s fifth reincarnation it was no longer a toll bridge and it was free for all to pass.

In 1899, construction began on the bridge to modernize it, place a swivel in it's center, and shift it slightly to the north where it connected to Fairhaven. This construction was completed in 1902. That's the bridge we all "love" and sits there today. I know there are more than a few people who would love for a gale or epic storm to come and wash this bridge away a final time. However, keeping with the aforementioned New Englander attributes, it would simply rise from the ashes like some evil Phoenix, waiting for the moment you are pressed for time, late for an appointment, or felt like relying on the warning sign.

A new street is born out of necessity

On the New Bedford side of the Acushnet River, Bridge Street abutted the farm owned by the Kemptons. In 1788 Ephraim Kempton, son of William Kempton was the current owner of the farm. His farm lay smack dab in the middle of physical and economic progress of the two cities. After people would cross Bridge Street and enter New Bedford they typically would go north or south along the waterfront or the many markets and businesses that lay on streets like Front, Water, Rodman and Centre. It was only a matter of time before people would, out of necessity need to get to other parts of the city in a more direct manner.

Ephraim decided to build a street going through the middle of his farm that connected to Bridge Street so as to maintain the progress of the city. Eventually the name Middle Street came into common parlance and replaced the Bridge Street name. The foresight that Ephraim had was born out as within that year Middle Street would undergo two extensions. Within 10 years it would reach County Street.

Middle Street Timeline

c1759: Granddaughter of Joseph Russel mentions an Indian

Wigwam sat in the woods in what would eventually be Bridge and Middle Street.

1788: John Howland purchases property on the south side of Middle street and extends a wharf from it. Throughout the year the street would be extended two more times. First extended to meet Water Street, then to 2nd Street.

1792: Matthew Howland builds Samuel Rodman's first house on the southwest corner of Middle and Water Streets.

1798: Middle Street is extended to County Road (now County Street.)

1799: McPherson-Bullock house built.

1804: John Avery Parker builds his first of many homes on the southeast corner of Purchase and Middle Streets.

1806: Post Office is moved to a site on Middle Street.

c1813: John Howland builds stone building for an oil manufacturing company on the corner of Middle and Water. It stood where is now the front of the Standard-Times Building on the JKF Memorial Highway.

1832: Post Office vacates it's spot on Middle Street and locates to a small wooden building on Union Street.

1833: John Avery Parker purchases property at the foot of Middle Street and it's called Parker Block.

1833: Sixth Street was extended from Elm Street to Middle Street. North Christian Church, designed by Russell Warren in a Greek Revival Style.

1836: The Post Office-Customs House is built.

1837: Middle Street is extended from County Street to Summer Street.

1844: Middle Street School is built.

1845: New Bedford High School built on the corner of Summer and Middle Street.

1852: Portions of Middle Street receive public sewer works.

1859: Vessel the John & Edward, 20 buildings, and 8,000 barrels of oil are burned in a fire that destroys sections of Middle Street.

1869: Possible first use of Macadam roads at Bridge Square.

1881: New Bedford Co-Operative Bank opens at 125 Middle

Street.
1889: The New Bedford Co-Operative Bank becomes the Acushnet Co-Operative Bank.
1901: Main Building at Parker Block/Bridge Square torn down.
1902: The New Bedford Home for the Aged is incorporated at 396 Middle Street.
1922: North Christian Church is demolished and replaced with Sear's Roebuck Store on corner of Middle and Purchase Streets.
1970: Explosion at 2:30 a.m. at 209 Middle Street, Sully's Inn and Italian Spaghetti House.
1973: Urban renewal leads to the demolition of many houses.
1976: Middle Street becomes one of the boundaries for the County Street Historic District.
1980: Middle Street becomes one of the boundaries for the Central New Bedford Historic District, which includes City Hall.
2011: Hurricane Irene sends 4 boats crashing into the New Bedford/Fairhaven Bridge.

If you have any corrections, additions, advice or anecdotes to share please comment below or e-mail us at ngbarts@gmail.com.

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#01: Otis A. Sisson's Soap Factory, 1869. Corner of N. Water and Middle Streets. By N.B. Whaling Museum.
#02: Elm Baptist Church circa 1920, Middle Street East of County. Photo by Joseph S. Martin.
#03: Christian Church circa 1870. Middle and 6th Streets with 2 children in foreground. By Stephen F. Adams.
#04: Old New Bedford Custom House Corner – Water and Middle Streets. Photo by Gifford R. Swain.
#05: Corner of Middle and Purchase Streets. Photo by N.B. Whaling Museum.
#06: New Bedford High School circa 1905 on Middle & Summer Streets. By N.B. Whaling Museum.
#07: McPherson-Bullock House on corner of Middle and North Second Streets circa 1905. By Fred W. Palmer.

#08: Parker Block/Bridge Square at the end of junction of Bridge and Middle Streets. By N.B. Whaling Museum
#09: Parker Block/Bridge Square rounding Middle Street to Front Street. By N.B. Whaling Museum.
#10: Health department – 116 Middle Street. By Spinner Publications.
#11: Looking down Middle Street 1934. By Spinner Publications.
#12: School at Middle and Summer Streets. By Spinner Publications.
#13: Northwest corner of Purchase and Middle Streets. By Spinner Publications.
#14: Purchase and Middle Street circa 1940s.

If you would like more photos like those in the gallery, both Spinner Publications and the New Bedford Whaling Museum have Flickr accounts with thousands of images.
