

# It Began with a Mill and a Bridge

## The Beginning and End of Sawyer's Mills

by Carrie Crane

Sawyer's Mills, on the bank of the south branch of the Nashua River, in then Lancaster, Massachusetts would eventually become a small manufacturing village. It was first settled in 1721, when Joseph Sawyer entered into an agreement to build a sawmill there. (See more in *Sawyer's Mills Village, The Earlier Years* on Friday's Fantastic Finds) The mill and businesses expanded and were passed onto his wife and two sons Aaron Sr. and Abner. Aaron Sr. died in 1774 and his share passed onto his son Aaron Sawyer, Jr. At this time Aaron Jr. bought out the other heirs and became the sole owner of what was now established as Sawyer's Mills. The bridge at Sawyer's Mills was one of two in town that crossed the Nashua River which cut its way through Boylston limiting travel from east to west. The second bridge at Scar's crossed the river a few miles south. While Scar's bridge was an important crossing point, the establishment of a store, post office and school at Sawyer's Mills likely made it more of a thoroughfare connecting areas west, now West Boylston and Sterling to the eastern town of Berlin.

In Matthew Davenport's 1831 *History of Boylston*, he describes Boylston's roads by saying:

*"The two principal roads are the county road from the west which passes through the northwest, north, and northeast parts of the town, a distance of about 3 1/2 miles, crossing the river at Sawyer's Mills, and thence on to Berlin. A stage now runs on this road from Boston three times a week; and the mail arrives three times every week from the east and the same number from the west."*

It was as true in the 1800s as it is today, quality roads and bridges were a link to an area's economic success. Although Sawyer's Mills never developed into a major stagecoach hub, passengers, freight and mail did pass through there and surely added to its modest economy. The stagecoach era really boomed in New England between 1820 and 1840 and during that time, coaches and roads were much improved but the travel remained slow, uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous. By mid-century stagecoach lines were gradually but steadily being replaced by faster and comparatively luxurious railroads.



*Looking south at the bridge at Sawyer's Mills as it looked in 1899.  
The school house is shown on the left and the store and post office on the right.*

In 1869 “Railroad Fever” was at its peak and every little hinterland village wanted the rail to pass through. A group of citizens from the eastern and central part of the Massachusetts, inspired by the successful petition the previous year for a line from Wayland to Sudbury, brought forth their own petition to the state legislature for the charter of a railroad from Northampton to Boston. On May 10<sup>th</sup> of that year the legislature created the Massachusetts Central Railroad. No less than thirty-eight towns along the proposed route were invited to purchase stock in the company thus guaranteeing a station stop. Sawyer’s Mills, having established itself as a crossroads with stagecoach travel, was a logical location. As it turned out, Boylston ultimately was the home to two stops, one at Sawyer’s Mills known as Boylston Station, and one nearer the Clinton and Berlin boundaries, known as South Clinton Station.



*On left, the Boylston Station of the Central Mass Railroad and on the right, the South Clinton Station, 1896.*

Building of the rail began in 1871 under contract with Norman C. Munson of Shirley, Massachusetts. Unfortunately, Munson was already financially overextended when he took on the project and did not survive the financial panic of late 1873. He declared bankruptcy and all work on the rail was halted for a period of 5 years. Building finally resumed in 1879 under a new financial structure and the Massachusetts Central Railroad ran its first train from Boston to Hudson on October 1, 1881. The line opened westward to Jefferson the following year with three round-trip runs daily. Everything went well for about a year and a half but on May 16, 1883, financial catastrophe hit again. All trains were stopped and construction ceased as the railroad property was surrendered to the trustees of the first mortgage bond, Thomas H. Perkins, Henry Woods and the Honorable S. N. Aldrich.

The tracks lay silent for twenty-nine months but during that time, with faith in the success of the line, Aldrich reorganized the company, (subtly) renamed it the Central Massachusetts Railroad and agreed to have the Boston and Lowell Railroad take over operations. On September 28, 1885, the trains began to run again and for ten years they ran regularly with mishaps here and there, through Sawyer’s Mills carrying passengers and freight to this small but vital manufacturing village.

And then came the reservoir. In 1893, the Boston Water Board in response to the growing need for clean drinking water for the city and surrounding towns, requested that the mayor approve the expenditure of \$40,000 to investigate three potential options for meeting the water demand. Building a dam across the south branch of the Nashua River in Clinton, MA was the winning proposal. The result would be the flooding of 4,000 acres of land including parts of Clinton, West Boylston, and Boylston, completely submerging the area known as Sawyer’s Mills. Along with the many other homes and businesses that were taken down, so went the fate of the two Central Mass Railroad stations at Boylston and South Clinton. The project also forced the relocation of the rail detouring it north from Oakdale on the Worcester Nashua line towards Clinton and then east just north and down-stream of the dam.

The rerouting, which included the construction of a 917 ft. viaduct high over the river and the digging of a 1,110 ft. tunnel, was ready for its first train on June 2, 1903. And none too soon. While the dam would not be completed until 1905, it was already constricting the flow of water, so later that June, after an unusual period of heavy rain, the already abandoned track and village of Sawyer's Mills were partially submerged giving a somber hint of what was to come.

Ultimately, once the flood waters had cleared, all the mill buildings, the store, the post office, the station and tracks, the bridges, the chapel, the barns, and homes were all dismantled and taken away. By 1908, what had been the village of Sawyer's Mills was now under almost 90 feet of water and the stories left to the history.



*Looking south at Sawyer's Mills as seen at high water after the June 1903 deluge.  
These buildings were later removed before the final filling of the reservoir.*

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***Acknowledgements:***

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