

# Where was the Indian Bridge Over Ipswich River?

By LURA WOODSIDE WATKINS

**M**ANY years before the white men came to Salem the Indians had made and used a trail from the seacoast to Canada. It ran from Salem through Danvers and Middleton to Andover, and so north. Various attempts have been made to trace its exact route. Certain roads in Middleton are believed to have been built following its approximate course.

All our early Essex County historians, after detailed research, came to the conclusion that the Indian trail crossed the Ipswich River somewhere near the present bridge on Maple Street. For centuries this crossing used by the Indians was called the "Indian Bridge." I find it so named in the Boxford town records in 1696, and the term was evidently traditional this early.

In 1866 W. W. Upham made a map of Salem Village as it appeared in 1692 for Charles W. Upham's *Salem Witchcraft: with an account of Salem Village*. On this diagram the Indian Bridge is located at the point where the Maple Street bridge stands today. Later on, in a series of articles describing Salem Village in 1700, Sidney Perley made what is now proved to be the same error, which also appears on a small map in his history of Salem.

Perhaps because it seemed an impossibility to learn the true location of the Indian crossing, they assumed that it must have been at the same place where the white men built their bridge. This was a hasty conclusion. By a strange chance, in

doing some research on a different subject, I have stumbled upon information that gives the exact spot. This is not so important in itself, except that a determination of the site changes the position of the early bounds between Boxford and Salem Village.

Last spring I made a thorough study of the history of the Deacon Edward Putnam house in Middleton. This still stands on Gregory Street and is owned and occupied by Mr. and Mrs. R. Lionel Barrows. Deacon Edward was a son of Deacon Edward of Salem Village, who figured prominently in the church there. The earlier Edward owned a large tract of land bordering on the Ipswich River. Part of his estate, including his homestead, lay over the line in what is now Danvers, but the northern part of it extended down river north of Maple Street. The land records in the Putnam family are particularly clear, and because there have been few visible changes in the part of the property owned by the younger Edward, it is fairly easy to follow the former boundaries.

Deacon Edward Putnam gave houses to his sons when they were married. These were formally conveyed, as in the case of the younger Edward, a number of years after they had been living in them. Edward was married in 1705. His house is mentioned in Topsfield town records in 1707-1708, when Topsfield was about to build a road from John Nichols's house down along the "cartway" that is now Maple Street "to the River by or beyond

Edward Putnam's house." (This, obviously, cannot refer to his father's house, which was nearly a mile away.) The property was deeded by the father to the son, January 19, 1718-1719.

The homestead of Edward's brother Ezra lay to the south of this land, and the

place upon a Strait line across the Island *To a stone lying in Ipswich River at the place called the Indian Bridge.*" (Italics added.) In a similar gift to Ezra, he refers to "a great stone lying in the river, at the place called the Indian Bridge."

It must be explained that the "Island"



LARGE BOULDER MARKING THE SITE OF THE INDIAN BRIDGE OVER IPSWICH RIVER.

Photograph by the author.

boundary line between the two is what concerns us here. The elder Putnam made a will, March 11, 1731, in which the bounds are clearly expressed. To Edward he gave ten acres in addition to what he already had, "bounded with a stake and a heap of stones by the highway that goes from my house to his house [Gregory Street], which heap of stones is also his brother Ezra's bound mark; and from his bound mark upon a Strait line over the Swamp and plain, till it comes where the water comes out of the Island into his Spong[e] of meddow. Then from that

is an oval elevation or drumlin some fifteen acres in extent on the right bank of the river. At low water it is not actually an island, but always was so when the river was high until very recently when the roadway was raised above water level. Not many years ago the island was owned by J. J. H. Gregory and was known as "Gregory's Island."

While trying to find the early boundaries of her land, Mrs. Barrows came upon the old stone wall across the island that now divides the part owned by the state from the northern half belonging to

Gustavus Fischer. But there was no great rock to be seen at the end of it! Referring then to a later deed of the Putnam property, when Edward's son Miles sold it to Enos Knight, on April 12, 1758, we found the boundaries more accurately described for distances, and learned that the other end of the wall, where Ezra Putnam's bounds had been marked on the road (Gregory Street), was 1,300 feet, or a bit short of a quarter of a mile, from Maple Street. This I measured with my car and was not surprised to find that it took me to the beginning of an old wall just north of the driveway into the State Colony. This could be traced across the meadow and thence across the island—the same wall noted by Mrs. Barrows.

We now felt reasonably sure of the original boundary line leading to the great rock, but we still had to find the rock. This information was supplied by Mr. Fischer, who said that the stone was indeed there, but could be seen only at low water in the summer. We had therefore found the exact location of the Indian Bridge, as described in 1731. It was one quarter mile upriver from Maple Street.

As the water receded in June, it was easy to see why the Indians should have chosen this place for a crossing. Of course, they did not actually build bridges, but the river is so narrow at this point—not more than twenty feet—they could easily have felled a tree to serve the purpose. In late summer when the water is not over six inches deep, they could have waded across. Their selection of this ford may also have been governed by the fact that the island was an attractive and safe camping place.

In all early references to the bridge at Maple Street I find it called simply "the River bridge," or the "bridge over the River." A considerable causeway had to be constructed to place it in its present location, showing that it would not have

been a suitable crossing for the Indians. The stonework of the causeway is mentioned in the will of Deacon Edward Putnam of Middleton, wherein he devised to his son Miles a piece of land across river from the island. Running northwardly, its boundary went to the "end of the stone wall by the cawsway, then by said cawsway to the River, then to turn southwardly up the River," etc.

Looking at Mr. Upham's map of this area, one will see that in 1692 Boxford (Rowley Village) projected southward in a long strip between Salem Village and Ipswich River, while the land east of the river was still part of Topsfield. The boundary between Topsfield and Salem Village, which later became the line between Danvers and Middleton, approached the river from the northeast at the southern point of the so-called "island." It will be observed that on Upham's map the Boxford boundary on the west side of the river does not meet this line. The reason is that former historians have interpreted the Boxford records fixing the line as if the Indian Bridge were at Maple Street, instead of a little more than a quarter of a mile south of it.

The bounds were fixed between Boxford and the "Will's Hills men" (Thomas Fuller, Sr., Thomas Fuller, Jr., and Thomas Wilkins (son of Bray) in July 1696, as follows (in modern spelling):

"From a tree marked, by the river about forty rods above the Indian Bridge; and from thence upon a north-west course to a heap of stones a little beyond William Way's house; and from thence upon a north-west course to a heap of stones by Pout Pond Brook," etc. William Way's house stood a short distance east of the present site of the Middleton Congregational Church. Again taking a look at the map, it is evident that a line taken from a quarter mile above the Maple

Street bridge would run but slightly north of west, while a line from the same distance above the Indian Bridge would run a true northwest course and would furthermore be a continuation of the Topsfield-Salem line.

It is hoped that future map makers will bear these facts in mind. It would also be fitting to have placed a suitable marker to preserve the memory of this early site, which had become but a legend even in the time of the earliest inhabitants.

