

Towpath Topics

Middlesex Canal Association P.O. Box 333 Billerica, MA 01821
www.middlesexcanal.org

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New foot bridge across the Middlesex Canal remnants leading to the new MCA Museum at 2 Old Elm Street. Photo Courtesy of Bill Cogley, lead construction contractor

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Editors' Letter

Hello Readers!

Welcome back to *Towpath Topics*. The focus of this issue is an update of local happenings; the MCC annual meeting minutes, a report on the massive bike/pedestrian projects by Andrew Jennings and Bill Kuttner, and up-to-date information on the new museum by Betty Bigwood. The anticipated Talbot Mill Dam removal vote by the BHDC was moved from April 2nd to May 7th. For a change of pace, an article, with maps and photographs, by MCA President J. Breen on the Thoreau brothers visit to the Summit Pond is included.

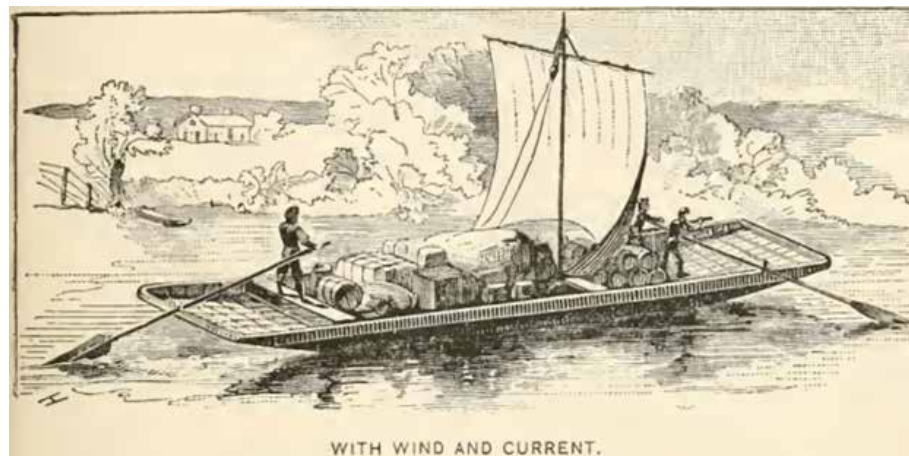
Towpath Topics has been published now for over fifty years. Many editors have come and gone but they have all faced the same dilemma - getting contributions! Your editors need submissions from readers and others to be able to make each issue a success. So please, if you are working on any research, or know anyone who is, that is relevant, or at least a bit interesting, please, please send it along to us!

Thank you,
Your Editors

MCA Sponsored Events – 2025 Schedule

Annual Meeting: The Annual Meeting of the MCA will be held on **Sunday, May 18, 2025 at 1:00pm** in the Reardon Room at the Middlesex Canal Museum and Visitors' Center, 71 Faulkner Street, North Billerica, MA 01862. MCA President J. Breen will speak about Allan Evan Herrick (1854-1931). Mr. Herrick did five accurate woodcuts of canal boat operations between Boston and Concord, NH. Prior to President Breen's address, there will be a short MCA business meeting. Among the agenda items will be the election of a slate of Board Members (see below) for the upcoming year.

J. Jeremiah Breen	President
Traci B. Jansen	Vice President
Russell B. Silva	Treasurer
Neil P. Devins	Membership Secretary
Howard B. Winkler	Corresponding Secretary & Treasurer Emeritus
Betty M. Bigwood	Director & Museum Building Committee Chair
Thomas H. Dahill, Jr.	Director & Artist in Residence
Debra Diffin Fox	Director & TT Copy Co-Editor
Roger K. Hagopian	Director & Videographer
Richard Hawes	Director & Building Committee Member
Alec Ingraham	Director & TT Copy Co-Editor
Robert Winters	Director, Webmaster, & TT Publisher



One of Allan Evans Herrick's canal boat woodcuts.

23rd Fall Bike Tour: 9:00am, Sunday, October 5, 2025

Meet at the Middlesex Canal plaque right at the entrance to the Sullivan Square T Station, 1 Cambridge Street, Charlestown, MA 02129.

Leaders: Dick Bauer and Bill Kuttner.

Fall Walk: 1:30pm, Sunday, October 19, 2025

Maple Meadow Aqueduct.

Meet at kiosk, 35 Towpath Drive, Wilmington, MA 01887.

Fall Meeting: 1:30pm, Sunday, October 26, 2025

Speaker and location TBA.

For more information on the Spring and Fall Walks, our Bike Tours, and our meetings, please access the MCA website, www.middlesexcanal.org.

The Visitors Center/Museum is open Saturday and Sunday, Noon - 4:00pm, except on a holiday. The Board of Directors meets the 1st Wednesday of each month, 3:30-5:30pm, except July and August. Check the MCA website for updated information.

Directions to Museum: 71 Faulkner Street in North Billerica, MA

By Car: From Rte. 128/95

Take Route 3 (Northwest Expressway) toward Nashua, to Exit 78 (formerly Exit 28) "Treble Cove Road, North Billerica, Carlisle". At the end of the ramp, turn left onto Treble Cove Road toward North Billerica. At about ¾ mile, bear left at the fork. After another ¼ mile, at the traffic light, cross straight over Route 3A (Boston Road). Go about ¼ mile to a 3-way fork; take the middle road (Talbot Avenue) which will put St. Andrew's Church on your left. Go ¼ mile to a stop sign and bear right onto Old Elm Street. Go about ¼ mile to the bridge over the Concord River, where Old Elm Street becomes Faulkner Street; the Museum is on your left and you can park just beyond the bridge in the lot on your right. Watch out crossing the street!

From I-495

Take Exit 91 (formerly Exit 37) North Billerica, then south roughly 2 plus miles to the

stop sign at Mt. Pleasant Street, turn right, then bear right at the Y, go 700' and turn left into the parking lot. The Museum is across the street (Faulkner Street). To get to the Visitor Center/Museum enter through the center door of the Faulkner Mill and proceed to the end of the hall.

By Train:

The Lowell Commuter line runs between Lowell and Boston's North Station. From the station side of the tracks at North Billerica, the Museum is a 3-minute walk down Station Street and Faulkner Street on the right side.

President's Message – "Thoreau Towpath"

by J. Breen

The Thoreau Towpath¹ of the Middlesex Canal has in part been incorporated into the MassDOT Priority Trails network² through the efforts of the Friends of Regional Trails and Towpaths (FORTT)³. March 26, 2025, four staff from the Lowell planning department went on a tour of the canal route in Lowell through the effort of FORTT to ensure that the canal was part of the city's open space and recreation plan. Lowell's plan of improvements to Hadley Field includes a ship in the playground - not a canal boat.



The Concord River part of Henry and John Thoreau's journey is well known as the MC Museum and Visitor Center is at the Billerica Falls. "But now at length we heard this staid and primitive river rushing to her fall, like any rill. We here left its channel, just above the Billerica Falls, and entered the canal."

The Merrimack River part, 5¼ miles away from the Falls, is less well known. "By noon we were let down into the Merrimack through the locks at Middlesex [Village], just above Pawtucket Falls, by a serene and liberal-minded man [Samuel Hadley], who came quietly from his book, though his duties, we supposed, did not require him to open the locks on Sundays. With him

we had a just and equal encounter of the eyes, as between two honest men.

"On the sandy shore, opposite the Glass-house village in Chelmsford, at the Great Bend, where we landed to rest us and gather a few wild plums, we discovered the campanula rotundifolia, a new flower to us, the harebell of the poets, which is common to both hemispheres, growing close to the water. Here, in the shady branches of an apple tree on the sand, we took our nooning,"⁴

The Google Earth photo below shows the soonest spot where the Thoreau brothers would have had lunch after their long journey on river and canal after breakfast on Fox Island.



On the north bank, directly opposite the railroad culvert in the place of the canal on the south bank is a memorial to Scotty Finneral. Senator Paul Tsongas is said to have chosen the location but the reason for the location is unknown.

Notes.

1. Internet Archive, movie of 1829 survey plotted in Google Earth Pro, <https://archive.org/details/160117-thoreau-towpath>
For 1920 x 1080 resolution, use Download Options / Windows Media.
2. MassDOT Priority Trails interactive map can be found at <https://www.mass.gov/guides/masstrails-priority-trails-network-vision>
3. Friends of Regional Trails and Towpaths, <http://middlesexcanal.org/FORTT/>
4. A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Henry Thoreau, 1849, pp. 66, 79, and 89. <https://archive.org/details/weekonconcordmer1849thor>



Finneral
memorial



Our Very Own Bridge

by Betty Bigwood

In April of 2025 a 55 ft. fiberglass bridge was installed over the Middlesex Canal connecting the car park with our new museum at 2 Old Elm Street. Two modest sized packages had arrived a few weeks earlier and were covered by blue tarps awaiting good weather. I emailed our Contractor, after seeing pictures of the modest piles, “Seventy thousand dollars doesn’t bring as much as it used to”. He agreed.

When the weather improved, our contractor and his men opened the packages of fiberglass, took a day figuring out the “Lego” design parts and put it together on the asphalt of the car park in a little over a week. A crane was hired (\$3200) to pick up the bridge and place it over the canal onto concrete bases. Plywood at each end kept visitors at bay until the treated wood walkway was installed. In the next few days, a twenty-foot wood ramp will be built from the bridge to the car park for a handicapped access. Connecting the end of the bridge near the building is more complicated. The base of the bridge, resting on the concrete, will be covered by treated wood to blend in with the wood of the bridge and concrete floor entrance. Wrought iron railings will be used at the main entrance.



Our little museum is built on a peninsula. We needed two separate exits to meet code. We also needed an air exchange closed room when people entered.

The air exchange room would have taken up too much space inside so a vestibule on the exterior of the south side of the building was designed as the primary entrance. Getting permits for all this was not easy. Kudos go to our president, J. Breen, who frequently called PACE to provide a long-term lease of land for parking places and to allow the bridge to start there.

Fiberglass bridges are said to last fifty years. It is all very exciting.

Middlesex Canal Remnants Emerging as Catalyst for Bike/Ped Trail Development

by Bill Kuttner and Andrew Jennings

Early during the COVID lockdown, MassDOT announced a new innovative, competitive grant program “Shared Streets and Spaces.” The program sought creative ideas for reuse of street spaces given the changes in travel demand and the rapid growth of cycling and hiking. It also opened lines of communication among transit advocates, outdoor advocates, and those interested in transportation history. As a result of these new lines of communication, early in 2023 five MCA members began meeting as an informal working group to identify opportunities, develop conceptual plans, and advocate for the construction of new paths for bicycles and pedestrians, referred to in the planning profession as “multi-use paths”. Notably, all five of us are both interested in the historic Middlesex Canal and in active transportation, both for our own enjoyment and as an important use of public space. At our usually weekly meetings, however, we have had guests representing a broad range of interests: sports, open space, history, and politics to name a few. All have given encouragement and many offer practical support. As our efforts became better known we realized we needed a name: we are the Friends of Regional Trails and Towpaths, or FORTT.

As reflected in its name, FORTT decided to focus on regional multi-use paths and the reuse of historic transportation rights-of-way. FORTT sees a significant enhancement of value in connecting and extending existing and planned paths to create a network of paths. Historic transportation rights-of-way, particularly railway and canal rights-of-way make good bike paths as they are level, straight, and have much less interaction with motor vehicles than using streets. A well-designed multi-use path can make the public more aware of the region’s transportation history. The routes are protected from development as they become public recreation lands.

The group quickly focused on two historic rights-of-way, the little used MBTA owned rail line between the North Billerica commuter rail station and Boston Road in Billerica originally built by the Billerica and Bedford narrow gauge railroad, and the remnants of the Middlesex Canal between that right-

of-way and the Merrimack River. The map indicates the conceptual route from the Vandenberg Esplanade in Lowell (north of the Merrimack River) to the planned Yankee Doodle Bike Path in Billerica. The route proposes to connect to the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail (built through Concord to Sudbury) and the Lowell Connector Trail (which is planned to connect to the Concord River Greenway) near Cross Point Tower. After finding a route around the US 3 / I-495 / Lowell Connector interchange, the route will continue to the planned Yankee Doodle Bike Path in Billerica.

The conceptual plan calls for the path to follow four segments of the Middlesex Canal:

- 1) In Lowell, from the Mount Pleasant Golf Club to where Route 3 was built over the Canal
- 2) In Chelmsford, along Canal Street from Riverneck Road to the Billerica town line
- 3) In Billerica, from the Chelmsford town line along McLennan Way and Lowell Street
- 4) In Billerica, from the summit pond to the former Billerica and Bedford right-of-way.

A shared use path using these railroad and canal rights-of-way builds significant, meaningful connections among existing paths.

We rolled out our concepts in April 2023 at one of the regular meetings of the Middlesex Canal Association. We also hosted a bike ride in June 2023 that included, MassDOT bike/ped coordinator, Pete Sutton. In the morning, we had a multi-modal (bikes and cars) field trip that visited sites of our proposed improvements. After lunch at Captain John’s the Lowell Public Works Department led a tour of trail extension opportunities in Lowell’s dense residential and industrial urban fabric. The canal bike ride that September visited the same locations that we took Pete Sutton to, and a more complete description of our specific proposals appears in the October 2023 Towpath Topics. <http://www.middlesexcanal.org/towpath/towpathtopicsOct2023.htm#FallBike2023>

Pete Sutton was supportive of our proposals and noted that our projects were on corridors already shown on or complementary with a planned statewide trail network, available on the MassTrails website (<https://www.mass.gov/welcome-to-masstrails>). The next steps were for us to work through municipalities which would in most cases be the project proponents and to also work with the Northern Middlesex Council of Governments (NMCOG), the regional planning agency that helps coordinate and program available state funding for projects of municipal and other proponents.

In March 2024 we were invited to present at a MassDOT Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Board held at NMCOG. NMCOG was already familiar with most of our proposals because we had suggested them in official comments on their 2050 long-range transportation plan (LRTP). They said that if the project descriptions were fleshed out a bit the projects might be added to a “universe” of potential projects, simplifying the process by which a municipality could step up and become a project proponent.

FORTT is now working on a pre-feasibility analysis of alternative paths for the full route between the new Rourke bridge and the Yankee Doodle Bike Path. The data we are preparing parallels the analyses submitted to support construction of paths in other parts of the state. NMCOG has retained Toole Design to do a regional bicycle/pedestrian study and we want to make sure that the important canal segments will be included in their recommendations.

Next Steps

Building shared use paths is typically a process that takes over a decade. Taking a concept and turning it into a design, particularly along a canal right-of-way where wetlands are present, then turning those designs into a trail is a difficult process. The small immediate steps that are underway include:

- 1) Continue to vet the plan with local and regional officials. Their feedback facilitates and guides the process.
- 2) Advocate to get the concept into the formal planning process, particularly the NMCOG active transportation plan and Lowell’s Open Space and Recreation Plans.
- 3) Develop a pre-feasibility study to give specificity to the plan, and to guide further development of the plan.
- 4) Hold discussions with local communities, Massachusetts Department of Transportation [MassDOT], MassTrails, and Massachusetts Department of Conservation & Recreation [MassDCR] to find funding for the initial design studies that will make the project eligible for public funding.

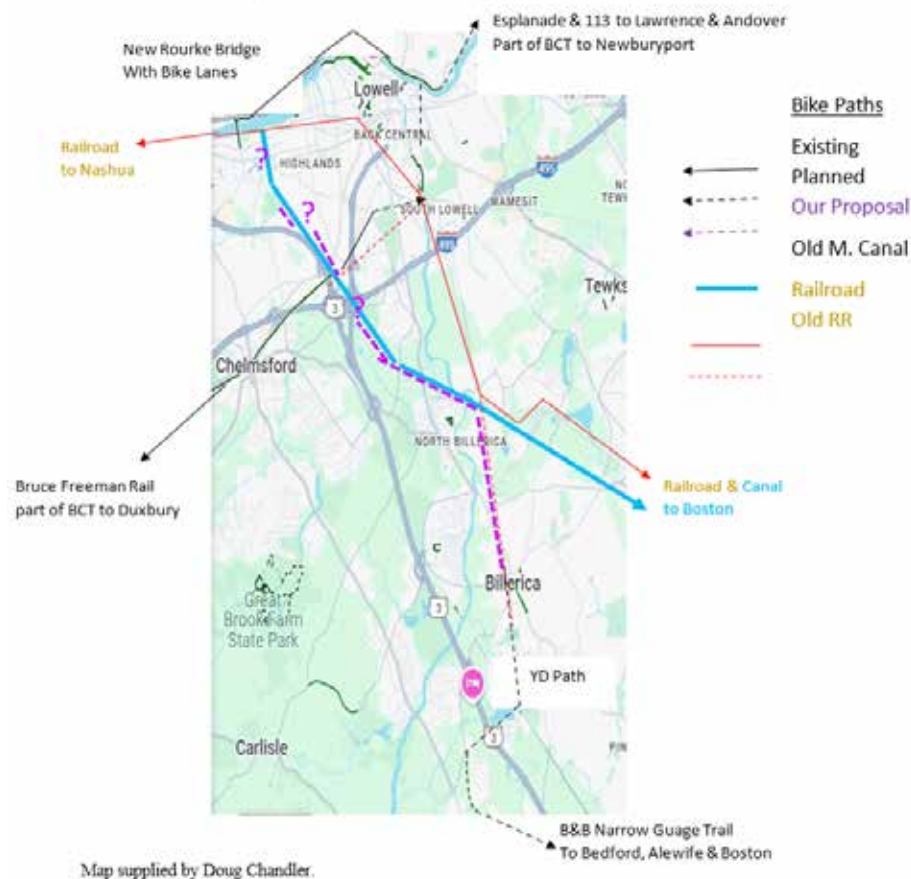
What You Can Do?

A bold regional trail plan needs advocates with varied interests and capabilities to push the project to completion. Your help and your skills can give a key boost to getting a trail implemented.

- 1) Support the Middlesex Canal Association and the Friends of Bedford Depot Park. These two organizations provide invaluable information about the historic transportation rights-of-way for the proposed path.
- 2) Let your public officials know that you want regional trails and the preservation and protection of historical transportation rights-of-way.

- 3) Show up at your town committees and public meetings where the trail proposals are being considered.
- 4) Volunteer your time to FORTT. At this time, we particularly need skills in map making, writing, and presentation development, as well as enthusiasm for hiking and biking.

Towpath Trail Project



2025 Annual Meeting – Minutes



THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
Middlesex Canal Commission



Attending: Thomas Lincoln (Chair); Mike Mcinnis (Vice-Chair, by phone); Betty Bigwood, (Treasurer, briefly by phone); Doug Chandler (Chelmsford); Peter Engel-

drum (Winchester); Richard Hawes (Billerica); Dick Bauer (Somerville) Guests: J. Breen (Pres., MCA); Bill Kuttner (Boston); Andrew Jennings (FORTT); Brian Burke (Medford); Bill Swanton (Winchester); Craig Miller (Waterfield Design, Winchester)

MCC Chair Intro: Mr. Lincoln called the Meeting to order at 3:19pm, welcomed attendees and thanked Betty Bigwood for providing the excellent pizza. He then briefly reviewed the timed Agenda.

Secretary's Report – The Minutes of the 2024 Annual Meeting were read and approved.

Treasurer's Report – Balance is \$2,441.13, per Betty Bigwood. The Treasurer's Report was approved.

FORTT Update – Doug Chandler gave an excellent summary of the efforts of the Friends of Regional Towpaths and Trails (FORTT) working group. The group, which includes Andrew Jennings, J. Breen, Bill Kuttner, and Marlies Henderson, has worked to develop a conceptual plan for a comprehensive trail system centered on the Middlesex Canal and other existing trail assets. Their advocacy builds on the greatly increased post-COVID interest in outdoor recreation. FORTT'S primary focus is on a "Thoreau Path" from the new Canal Museum to Lowell / Merrimack River. The overall goals are also to tie into existing rail trails (such as the Bruce Freeman Trail) and further the goals of the Commonwealth's Priority Trail Network, as well as help fulfill the mission of the Middlesex Canal Commission. Mr. Chandler detailed the overall plan and brought the attendees up to date since the 2024 Meeting. It is clear there is an excellent opportunity to heighten the visibility of the Canal, expand recreational opportunities and develop and mutual coalition between trail and history advocates. Mr. Jennings made some additional comments about the various route alternatives and the necessary advocacy in individual cities and towns. Mr. Kuttner offered additional comments as a longtime bicycling advocate and transportation planner. Attendees greatly appreciated the work of FORTT and enthusiastic applause followed.

Update on the Talbot Mills Dam Removal Proposal

This is the critical issue facing the Middlesex Canal and the Middlesex Canal Commission. Dam Removal proponents include NOAA, OARS, the Dam owner, and various agencies of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. They wish to remove the Talbot Mills Dam and drain the Summit Pond to enhance passage of anadromous fish. They have rejected the idea of providing a fish ladder/fishway on the existing Dam and are proceeding through a series of regulatory/permit steps, including the Section 106 process relevant to listed historic resources such as the Middlesex Canal, etc. Mr. Breen noted that Dam Removal proponents conducted an informal session on project/Section 106 mitigation on March 17 at the Canal Museum. Mr. Breen reiterated the MCA's continuing objection to any removal of the Talbot Mills Dam. Mr. Lincoln echoed Mr. Breen's sentiments and also noted that we await the decision of the Billerica Historic Districts Commission (HDC), whose next meeting is April 2, 2025*. The HDC has direct power over changes made to resources within the Billerica Mills Historic District, including the Talbot Mills Dam and Summit Pond.

Section Activities Reports [Note: some info came from other involved parties]

Lowell – NMCOC is proposing additional efforts on bicycle and pedestrian trails. Accordingly, Mr. Chandler offered the following motion, which was seconded and adopted unanimously:

Whereas: The Middlesex Canal Commission (MCC), the Middlesex Canal Association (MCA) and the Friends of Regional Towpaths and Trails (FORTT) have been working to make towpaths into multi-use trails, to bridge gaps in existing trail networks; and

Whereas: The Northern Middlesex Council of Governments (NMCOC) has recently initiated a Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan effort (BAPP) and is recruiting participants, and

Whereas: MCC and MCA have control of large sections of the old towpath by ownership or easement;

Therefore, the MCC votes to:

Support the NMCOC BAPP in principle, and

Encourage our members to cross-participate, and

Offer easements on our towpaths and other lands to be incorporated in any multi-use trail that may be constructed as a result.

It was further agreed that a conforming letter be sent to NMCOC by the MCC Secretary at his earliest convenience.

Chelmsford – Mr. Chandler previously reported on the activities of FORTT.

Billerica – Mr. Hawes noted the maintenance and landscaping improvements made to the wayside exhibit on Lowell Street.

Wilmington – no report

Woburn – no report

Winchester – The newish signage at the DCR's Shannon Beach was remarked upon. Mr. Engeldrum noted that the DCR did not consult the MCC about this installation. Another attendee noted that the signage was quite minimal. The idea of installing a plaque for Tom Raphael at the Canal site just north of Shannon beach was also raised.

Medford -Mr. Lincoln confirmed that there has been no Canal activity in Medford.

Somerville – no activity.

Charlestown – Mr. Kuttner of Charlestown raised the continuing issue of securing an appointment by the City of Boston as its representative to the MCC. (See below).

Current Status of the New Middlesex Canal Museum

Jay Breen of the MCA gave a brief update on this very exciting project. Much more information is available directly from the Middlesex Canal Association (MCA).

New Business

Mr. Lincoln reported that efforts are being made to secure a Commissioner from the Massachusetts Senate. He and Jay Breen have spoken to staff at Senator Payano and Senator Barry Feingold's offices. The latter appears to be the best bet for a Senator appointment; we expect to hear back soon. Mr. Kuttner noted, and Mr. Lincoln agreed,

we should then ask such an appointee to advocate with the City of Boston (see above).

Election of Officers

Mr. Lincoln reiterated his interest in stepping down as Chair. Via an e-mail to Mr. Lincoln, Mike McInnis, current Vice-Chair indicated his willingness to be nominated as Chair and, if elected, to serve until the 2026 Annual Meeting. Mr. Lincoln said he is willing to resume the Secretary position, if the Commission so desires.

A call for nominations was made and the following slate was nominated: Mike McInnis for Chair, Tom Lincoln for Secretary and Betty Bigwood for Treasurer. The slate was approved by acclamation. Mr. Lincoln then asked for a motion to allow him to continue to represent the MCC in the Section 106 process. So moved and passed unanimously.

Adjournment: A motion to adjourn was made and passed at 4:35pm.

This Final Corrected Version of the Minutes Respectfully submitted by
Thomas W. Lincoln, Secretary

*See Editors' Letter

MCA Spring Walk

The MCA Spring Walk along the remnants of the Middlesex Canal attracted approximately 80 people – one of the largest crowds in the history of the organization. The walk was led by MCA Board member (and *Towpath Topics* publisher) Robert Winters with the essential assistance of Marlies Henderson. The MCA holds walks semi-annually covering different sections of the canal on a rotating basis. This March 2025 trek covered the canal section from the North Billerica Mill Pond south to the Smallpox Cemetery.

Marlies Henderson and Robert Winters contributed the following pictures:



High Street MCC Marker site





MISCELLANY

Back Issues – More than 60 years of back issues of *Towpath Topics*, together with an index to the content of all issues, are also available from our website <http://middlesexcanal.org/towpath>. These are an excellent resource for anyone who wishes to learn more about the canal and should be particularly useful for historic researchers.

Estate Planning – To those of you who are making your final arrangements, please remember the Middlesex Canal Association. Your help is vital to our future. Thank you for considering us.

Membership and Dues – There are two categories of membership: **Proprietor** (voting) and **Member** (non-voting). Annual dues for “Proprietor” are \$25 and for “Member” just \$15. Additional contributions are always welcome and gratefully accepted. If interested in becoming a “Proprietor” or a “Member” of the MCA, please mail membership checks to Neil Devins, 28 Burlington Avenue, Wilmington, MA 01887.

Middlesex Canal Association Officers and Directors:

<http://www.middlesexcanal.org/directors.htm>

Museum & Reardon Room Rental – The facility is available at very reasonable rates for private affairs, and for non-profit organizations to hold meetings. The conference room holds up to 60 people and includes access to a kitchen and restrooms. For details and additional information please contact the museum at 978-670-2740.

Museum Shop – Looking for that perfect gift for a Middlesex Canal aficionado? Don’t forget to check out the inventory of canal-related books, maps, and other items of general interest available at the museum shop. The store is open weekends from noon to 4:00pm except during holidays.

Web Site – The URL for the Middlesex Canal Association website is www.middlesexcanal.org. Our webmaster, Robert Winters, keeps the site up to date. Events, articles and other information will sometimes appear there before it can get to you through *Towpath Topics*. Please check the site from time to time for new entries.

The **first issue** of the Middlesex Canal Association newsletter was published in October, 1963. Originally named “Canal News”, the first issue featured a contest to name the newsletter. A year later, the newsletter was renamed “*Towpath Topics*.”

Towpath Topics is edited and published by **Debra Fox, Alec Ingraham, and Robert Winters**. Corrections, contributions and ideas for future issues are always welcome.