Introduction

The Charles River has a rich and lengthy history, from the pre-colonial era to present day. For hundreds of years, it has been a sanctuary for endemic wildlife, a site of natural beauty, a defining geographic feature and landmark, a hub for industry, commerce, and economic development, and a focal point of daily life and social interaction in Eastern Massachusetts. The Charles — much like other principal rivers of New England such as the Merrimack, Kennebec, and Connecticut — has played a well-documented role in shaping the development of New England societies. Flooded property and disputes over water, dam, and mill privileges have
spurred rebellions, lawsuits, and innumerable changes in policy and judicial proceedings; dams, spillways, and canals have served as the engines of industry; and the rivers themselves have provided sites for recreation, settlement, and agriculture.

In many ways, South Natick’s evolving relationship with the Charles River is emblematic of the broader history of New England rivers. As in similarly situated communities across New England, South Natick has depended on its dam on the Charles River for power, employment, and recreation for hundreds of years. Through an exploration of primary and secondary source materials and visual aids, this ArcGIS StoryMap will examine the history of this dam in all its uncertainty and idiosyncrasies — a history which ultimately illustrates the town’s dynamic relationship with the Charles River, its legacy, and the role it continues to play in the daily life of South Natick residents.

1685-1720: The Sawin Saga

Thomas Sawin is widely held to have been the first white settler of Natick. After arriving in 1685, he was granted extensive property rights in what is now South Natick and Sherborn by King Charles II of England. Over the next several decades, Sawin built a large estate, including a series of much-contested dams and mills. His first dam and saw mill were built in Sherborn, but after entering into an agreement with local indigenous groups he was persuaded to move his mill site to a location in South Natick.

In exchange for a vast land grant, Sawin planned to erect a mill “for the benefit of the Indians”. As Oliver Bacon explained in his A History of Natick in 1856, “White men could have their corn ground, but Indians were to have the preference. They could even demand that the white men’s
corn should be taken from the hopper to give place to theirs.” The first deed conveying the land for this mill-site was provided in 1685, after which Sawin built both a saw mill and grist mill, properties that were inherited and maintained by his descendants for several generations.

Various *Boston Globe* reports in the late 20th century have claimed that the first dam on the current site in South Natick was constructed by Thomas Sawin (likely the grandson of the former) in 1722, when he began operating his own saw mill. Records from William Biglow’s *History of the Town of Natick* (1830), and notes from the Proceedings at the Reunion of the Descendants of John Eliot (1901), however, claim that it was Thomas’ son John, not his grandson Thomas, who erected a mill in South Natick on the Charles River, and in 1720 rather than 1722. This would make it the first dam on the Charles in South Natick, although this structure would have been located a half-mile upstream of the existing spillway. These accounts also claim that John Sawin was soon forced to relocate his dam to a nearby brook on account of protests by upstream owners of “the great meadows in Medfield” and by Medway farmers, who complained that his dam flooded their farms. In 1723 the Sawins relocated their dam site to Indian Brook, a tributary of the Charles River, where they continued to operate a grist mill for the ensuing forty years.

1733: Hezekiah Broad
In July, 1733, John Sawin sold his Charles River property — which encompassed “about an acre of land between the river and the road, the dam already built across the river, the works upon the dam and land adjoining, and all rights and privileges appertaining” — to Hezekiah Broad, a clothier previously of Needham. Shortly after purchasing the property, as well as adjoining ones on the north bank of the river from Rev. Oliver Peabody, Mr. Broad moved to Natick, where he became active in town political and social life. A plan of Broad’s properties — encompassing these sites and illustrating the old dam, mill site, and small downstream rapids — is shown above in an undated sketch from the archives of the Natick Historical Society.

At some point during this period, Broad and Peabody collectively built and operated a sawmill on the small brook that divided their properties on the north side of the river. (This tributary, now known as Davis Brook, meets the Charles River near Eliot Street between Joseph East Aîngier and Riverbend Drive.) There is, however, no evidence that Broad ever attempted to operate or expand the Charles River dam before his death in 1752.
Both Biglow and Bacon’s accounts from the mid-nineteenth century agree that in the early 1720s — a few years after John Sawin’s removal — a man by the name of Hastings built a dam across the river near Sawin’s former dam site, and erected a saw, corn, and fulling mill on the north bank of the river at the same time. This occasioned yet another lawsuit brought by the owners of the “Medfield meadows”, which forced Hastings to relocate his mills to a nearby brook. In 1742, however, Hastings acquired the Charles River privilege previously owned by Broad. He quickly moved the existing dam “a few hundred feet downstream and increased the height”, occasioning yet another legal dispute between Hastings and upstream property owners. While Hastings won the lawsuit, the dam was removed in 1766 due to persistent complaints from Medfield and Medway residents.
1778-1831: The Bigelow Mills

Around 1778, Deacon William Bigelow acquired water and property rights near the present-day spillway, just upstream of the Pleasant Street Bridge. In a document submitted to the Proceedings of the Descendants of John Eliot in 1875, Colonel William Nutt recalled that “at the end of the dam, stood his saw mill and grist mill, where the people of the neighboring towns brought their logs to be sawed and their corn to be ground”. Deacon Bigelow operated several mills — including a paper, saw, and grist mill — on this site for over fifty years along with his sons, Isaac and Abraham, who carried on the mill business after their father’s death in 1813.

In 1795, after repeated complaints from Medway and Medfield, the Bigelows agreed to keep their sluices open during high-water months if necessary to prevent upstream flooding. The dams were rebuilt in 1808 and 1815 due to extensive ice and flooding damage. The Bigelow Mills continued to operate as a successful and prosperous business until 1830, when a downstream dam owner — Josiah Newell of Charles River Village — increased the height of his dam, causing water “to back up and halt construction of an additional mill”. While the Bigelow brothers won the ensuing lawsuit, their plans for expansion were abandoned.
and the entire complex — as illustrated in this 1830 *Plan of the Bigelow Mills* — was sold at auction to a Mr. Bird of Walpole.

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**Development at the Dam Site**

![Map of the area around the dam site](image)

**A Two-Part Dam**

Before the construction of dams began in South Natick, the natural flow of the Charles River was generally to the north side of the island that now lies just below the spillway. In December of 1807, however, ice piled so high behind the dam that men were enlisted to cut port holes in the ice to let the water through. Later that winter, the dam on the north side of the river finally broke away, and was temporarily rebuilt until 1808, when it was rebuilt a foot higher. That same spring, a “great freshet excavated [a] ‘deep hole’” around
the south side of the dam. This created the island seen today, and allowed the Charles to flow equally around both its north and south sides of the island. This, however, necessitated the creation of a second dam — stretching from the island to the south river bank — at this site in 1808. This two-part dam structure was maintained until the construction of the present-day spillway until 1935, and is clearly shown in this 1920 Sanborn Map, courtesy of the Harvard Map Collection.

1837: A Question of Height

Despite numerous complaints from upstream neighbors, the deeds for South Natick mill properties make no specific reference to the height of any dam prior to 1837. However, the property deed shown at right — pulled from the file pertaining to the current dam site, found in the archives of the Natick Assessor's Office — offers an explanation of the height restrictions that soon ensued.
In 1837, Jabez Ellis was the reported owner of the dam and mill privileges (although the Bigelows did retain a large tract of land on the south side of the river which included at least partial dam rights). A deed from Bigelow to Ellis granted Ellis the right to raise the height of the dam one foot, and three permanent markers were designated in the deed in order to mark that height “at all times thereafter”. These included copper bolts “driven into a rock which lies on the southeast side of the mill pond or river above said dam… about seven rods distant from the road”, a second “driven in to a rock… on the northwest side of said river and below said dam… about three rods southwest from said road”, and the third “driven into a rock which lies on the southwest side of said river or mill pond twenty rods up stream… on land of the heirs of the late John Atkins”. Bigelow and Ellis agreed that the water level behind the dam should not exceed these markers, as well as that the “rolling part of the dam over which water might flow should not be less than 125 feet” in width. (Today’s concrete spillway, for reference, measures about 135 feet long, with an apron roughly 20 feet wide.)

1838-58: The Curtis Mills

Nearly eight years elapsed before another major mill owner took an interest in the Bigelows’ old property in South Natick. This inactivity was likely due to the dysfunctional state of the property after the Bigelow brothers' business failure. As George H. Kuhn, secretary of the Elliot Manufacturing Company at Upper Falls, noted in his diary in 1831, the site was considered “good privilege near a beautiful village”, worth $12,00 to $15,000, but “the dam is in ruins and there are no buildings of any value but a dwelling”. Finally, in 1838, Alan C. Curtis of Lower Falls bought the rights to the dam, mills, and accompanying lands, and was also awarded the right to raise the height of the dam by one foot, and to cut a canal to carry water to a nearby paper mill. The same year, Curtis was able to settle the long-running dispute with the dam owner at Charles River Village in Needham, controlling the dam’s height and consequent flooding in South Natick. Two years later and per his arrangement
with neighboring property owners, Curtis raised the height of his own dam.

However, this led to renewed complaints from upstream residents and businessmen, who demanded compensation. Ultimately, a compromise was reached whereby the water would be controlled via flashboards. (These boards, also known as “stop logs” or “stop planks”, can be placed along the top of a dam to increase its height and capacity.) By 1848, however, Abijah Richardson and others in Medway and Medfield were claiming that their meadows were “greatly injured” by the installation of extra flashboards. It was this year that the limits on the size of the mill pond (the pool above the dam), were finally established.

In the ensuing two years, Curtis oversaw the construction of several new mills, among them a paper and grist mill, as well as a new wool carding machinery. Some claim that Curtis sold his mills in 1858, while others claim he owned the retained ownership until later in the 1860s.

This 1853 map of Middlesex County from the Norman B. Leventhal Map Center identifies three distinct Curtis properties in South Natick.

Before their sale, however, Curtis owned and operated three distinct properties, circled in red in the 1853 map shown above. These
included two properties on the southern side of the river — one along the mill canal, and another immediately adjacent to the dam site — and one on the northern bank of the river. This last property is particularly notable, as it is the last recorded instance of milling or manufacturing activity immediately adjacent to the dam site along its northern bank. Future industry would be situated either on the southern bank of the river or along the mill canal, but never again on the northern bank.

1885-1930: Years of Industry

The late 1800s ushered in a new era of productive industry at the South Natick dam site characterized by rapid turnover. According to map records, between 1874 and 1908, the Flax Leather Manufacturing Company occupied some portion of river-side property and held dam and mill rights.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, electric companies attempted to generate electricity at the dam site. Beginning in 1890, the Eliot Falls Electric Company — which supplied power for streetlights in Natick, Wellesley, and surrounding towns — began harnessing the power generated at the site for electricity, even digging a new canal to a power station on Pleasant Street. The Company established a five-year contract with the town of Needham and a two-year contract with the town of Wellesley in 1893. The operation was later taken over by the Natick Gas and Electric Company, but was given up entirely by 1901 for two reasons: first, the water supply was inadequate for profitable electricity generation; and second, new legislation prohibited the company from depleting the mill pond, since drawing down the water beyond a certain level “exposed the banks and created nuisance”.

The same year, the state legislature also considered State Senate Bill 123, introduced by Senator William Nutt of Natick, which
provided that the water “shall not be drawn below the level of the top of the dam at South Natick over the Charles River, during the months of June, July, August, and September”. Interestingly, this bill was drafted in response to concerns over stench, property values, and malarial fever. This was largely a consequence of the severe drought of 1896, which resulted in exceptionally low flows on the Charles, triggering complaints over the “foul smelling” river bed and (likely exaggerated) fears of malarial fever after several reported incidents of illness.

By the time of Natick’s bicentennial celebration in the summer of 1901, the “old mill” was owned and operated by the Boston Rubber Cement Company, with observers taking special care to note how “handsomely decorated” and “beautiful [in] appearance” the site had been rendered in celebration. By 1904, however, Boston Bedding Supply, soon renamed Elliot Mills, Inc., had acquired the mill and associated lands on the southerly side of the river (including the mill canal or raceway and adjoining buildings). In 1919, Indian Spinning Mills, Inc. of Boston operated the dam and mills. The Stewart Manufacturing Company then operated at the site from late 1919 through 1929, until it was acquired by Wellesley National Bank at the start of the Great Depression.
This 1874 map (courtesy of the Norman B. Levanthal Map Center), shows the properties of the Flax Leather Manufacturing Co., including multiple buildings adjacent to the dam site and race way, and the old, two-part dam. Notice the addition of an engineering house just below the Pleasant Street Bridge — presumably built to monitor the condition of and releases from the dam — which disappears on later maps.
This undated sketch from the Natick Historical Society places an old "mill dam" in the late-1800s above Horace Holyoke Island, with mills on the north bank and a "wheel factory" on the south bank.
This map of South Natick — commissioned in the early 20th century for an atlas of Middlesex County, and now found at the Natick Historical Society — shows a two-part dam spanning Horace Holyoke Island, and the Boston Bedding Supply Company occupying the Pleasant Street property adjacent to the mill race. Active mills are located at the point where the mill race reconnects to the Charles River (near Water Street), but nowhere else.
A Sanborn Fire Insurance map of Natick conducted in 1920 shows a two-part dam above the Pleasant Street Bridge, but no mills or industrial activities near the present-day dam site. This "vacant factory" — illustrated in detail besides the race way — is the antecedent of the current structure at 22 Pleasant Street.

**Recreation by the Dam**

Throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, the area surrounding South Natick dam has been a preferred site for outdoor recreation. Numerous articles, books, and pocket guides have been published over the decades dedicated to the subject of boating on the Charles River, which was lauded by one 1908 magazine article as “afford[ing] a greater pleasure to a greater number of people than any other river stretch on equal length in America”. By the early twentieth century, the river included three distinct sections, separated by dam portages. The South Natick dam marked the beginning of the first and longest section, stretching
sixteen miles from Natick to West Roxbury. Canoeing and rowing on the Charles became so popular during this period that ordinances were enacted limiting canoeists’ activities and establishing a boat patrol force, which continuously monitored the area between Waltham and Newton Lower Falls. Boating in and around Natick became particularly popular, leading one author to declare it a “center of [the] canoeing industry” in 1908. The area still remains a popular summer destination for recreational boating, fishing, and swimming, providing some of the most scenic views and best birding and wildlife-viewing opportunities on the Charles, particularly near the present-day Broadmoor Audubon reserve.

This Sanborn Map from 1920 (courtesy of the Harvard Map Collection) shows a canoe and boat house located just above the mill pond on Eliot Street.

During the early twentieth century, the mill pond above the spillway also became a popular site for picnicking and swimming. The town’s first swimming hole was established just above the current dam site, with a boathouse located on Eliot street near the intersection with Badger Avenue (as shown in the map above). In September of 1930, the Town went so far as to appropriate $500 in funds to build a bathhouse below the dam at Pleasant Street, with the Hunnewell family agreeing to erect a suitable building at the additional cost of roughly $2000 in the spring of 1931. Disagreement between South and West Natick residents over placing of the bathhouse, however, ultimately resulted in the project’s dissolution.
Not to be deterred by these unfortunate circumstances, in December of 1932, Mrs. Shaw, an extended member of the Hunnewell family, offered two parcels of land to South Natick taxpayers: a small park on the south shore of the Charles River above the spillway, and a smaller parcel directly opposite the Bacon Free Library. The former site was proposed as the location for a new “bathing beach”, as the town’s previously established beach — being uncomfortably close to the spillway — was more hazardous and less aesthetic for recreational purposes than Mrs. Shaw’s property.

What About Flooding?

The history of the dam at South Natick has been marked by repeated floods, dangerous ice flows, and spring freshets which threatened to destabilize the dam and surrounding properties. The first recorded incident of dam failure occurred in the winter of 1807, when ice piled up behind and finally burst Bigelow’s dam, but the structure was quickly rebuilt the following spring. On February 16th, 1886, massive flooding on the Charles reignited concerns over the dam’s integrity. Townsfolk worried that if an upstream Sherborn dam were to fail, Natick’s aging dam would collapse too. The Boston Globe reported that downstream properties had already been partially inundated and evacuated, and the bridge at Pleasant Street was similarly flooded. Two days later, two holes emerged in the South Natick dam, and men were set to work plugging the breaches, opening the floodgates, and taking the “usual precautions”. While no “very serious” lasting damage was done, this statement’s particular wording suggests that regional flooding and dam failure were not unprecedented. That spring was later documented as an exceptional flood year, setting records for the highest recorded flows on the Charles River that would stand for 40 years.

Notable, but far from record-breaking floods were recorded in 1902 and 1920, rekindling concerns about the integrity of the South Natick Dam. In March 1920, the Boston Globe reported the dam
was “in a very much weakened condition”, and men were set to work
“in an effort to strengthen it by laying bags of soft coal against it
[which were] carried from the mills of the Dedham Finishing
Company on wheelbarrows and even on the shoulders of the
workers”. A brief panic was created when a rumor flew across town
“that the dam… had burst and that a deluge of ice and water was
sweeping down the river and would cause great property loss and
probably loss of life”. While the dam ultimately held, the flood
inundated several streets in up to two feet of water, stranding
multiple vehicles and flooding downstream properties near Water
and Lincoln Streets.

The dam finally failed in 1917, when the north dam (extending from
the north bank to the island) broke and a severe flood carried away
the arches of the Pleasant Street Bridge. The dam was damaged
again in April of 1929, when a severe Nor’easter created a breach
about 12 feet wide and 10 feet wide. Water downstream of the dam
site rose three to four feet above its usual level, rising over the north
and south banks and extending about 100 yards on each side of the
river. This break inundated the neighborhood downstream, flooding
the cellars of homes on Water and Lincoln Streets. Employees of the
Public Works Department attempted to divert the water with plank
barricades, and by diverting water into the old canal (on river right)
to relieve pressure on the dam.
This 1938 Natick Bulletin article illustrates the type of winter and spring flooding that has frequently plagued the area below the Pleasant Street Bridge. Images from South Natick show "a scene on Lincoln Street...where boats were used to get to dry land" (upper left); flooding on Water Street (lower left); and "the Pleasant street dam with Island Retreat submerged" (bottom right).

Disaster struck again in 1932, when the dam was once again destroyed. It remained in a state of disrepair for several months; marshes and fields near the banks soon became exposed, as did the “Indian bridge” — a series of large stepping stones which Native Americans supposedly used to cross the river in pre-colonial times — located less than a mile above the dam. It was in response to this last failure that the current dam at South Natick was finally built.
Motivations for Reconstruction

In the summer of 1933, South Natick residents at a special town meeting were asked to pass an article calling for the construction of “a sluiceway or spillway to be erected east of the present dam”. The motivations for reconstruction of the dam following its recent collapse were threefold: Natick residents and officials alike hoped that the new structure would beautify Old Town Park, create a new swimming hole upstream of the spillway, and create work in the midst of the Great Depression. By this time, the dam had not been used for water power purposes for several years, and so neither business interests nor power needs were the motive for its reconstruction. It is worth nothing that the reconstruction was also not in response to a perceived threat to public health or safety. The town Finance Board stated in March that there was “no danger in allowing the river to remain in its present condition”, with the water rushing through the enlarging break in the dam face, while the Board of Health reported “no health menace” caused by the uncovered flats upstream of the broken dam.

Building the (Current) South Natick Dam

The article presented to Natick taxpayers in the summer of 1933 affirmed that citizens were currently negotiating with the owners of the broken dam for rights to the bed of the Charles River, which would allow the town to build a water barrier on the site without the possibility of incurring damages to the dam owners. As the Auto Sickle Company (now the owner of the 22 Pleasant Street property) no longer used or maintained the dam, the transfer was readily agreed upon. Similarly, a town-appointed committee intended to study the dam and the rights of nearby riparian owners recommended the “taking of the private rights and land” near the site, which it was understood would be “turned over to the town at a nominal figure”.


Having ensured physical access to the dam site, the town Finance Board sought to determine the economic feasibility of reconstruction. In March of 1934, the Board announced that given the burdensome cost of reconstruction (just under $35,000) and lack of federal aid, it recommended postponing the project indefinitely. Despite this advice, at a special town meeting on March 26 of that year, 800 voters unanimously elected to build a new dam across the Charles River at South Natick “at or near the site of the former”. The $35,000 necessary for the dam’s reconstruction was to be borrowed and expended over a five-year period. A town committee was placed in charge of construction and instructed to begin organizing immediately. Support for the project was so strong that town employees offered to contribute 7.5 percent of their annual wages to the project, a proposition accepted by Natick voters at the same town meeting and reported the following day in a special Boston Globe bulletin.

In the ensuing days, the committee overseeing the dam’s construction began attempting to secure Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) funding for “unskilled workmen”. The committee noted that the vast majority of skilled labor necessary for the dam’s construction could be sourced from Natick, serving as a boon to the local economy. On March 31, the committee announced that work would commence on the river bank near Horace Holyoke Island in order to protect as much of the island as possible from erosion. The 1932 breach and previous floods had already eroded the island’s north side severely, causing several large elms on the island to topple. The committee hoped not only to preserve the island, but to develop it as one of the dam’s “beauty spots”. Per the committee’s recommendation, the “dam” was intended to consist of an earthen embankment and concrete spillway approximately 135 feet long and 12 feet deep, with an apron 20 feet wide. In accordance with state regulations, the project would also include the construction of a “fish-way” at the spillway’s southerly end and two large cast-iron sluice gates capable of being raised in case of emergency.
Work began on the spillway in May, less than a year after Natick residents had first approved its construction. Three weeks later, engineers announced the discovery of a solid rock foundation for the dam, assuaging fears that quicksand might undermine the site, costing the town “untold thousands”. Construction resumed, and was largely completed by summer’s end.

The project was touted not only as a boon to the town of Natick, but as an engineering accomplishment and economic success. The fishway erected on the South Natick Dam was acclaimed as the first on any dam on the Charles River, a source of pride for the project’s workers and Natick residents alike. As a project overseen, at least in part, by the Public Works Administration (PWA), it had also received FERA aid and support in raising the retaining wall below the spillway, clearing nearby land newly granted to the town of Natick, constructing a guard wall and rail on the eastern side of the Pleasant Street Bridge, and financing “the bulk of the labor” employed in the spillway’s construction. The project had also provided significant economic stimulus to Natick. In September of 1934, the Boston Globe reported that over 200 men and women were employed in the dam’s reconstruction, resulting in a weekly payroll of roughly $4000. The committee’s final report on the spillway proudly announced that an average of nearly 100 workers had been on the project’s payrolls for roughly six months, earning a total of nearly $25,000. Some went even further, tying the construction of the spillway to the long-term economic prosperity of South Natick. One 1934 article claimed that, by beautifying river-adjacent properties in town, the project would generate new development, and ensuing taxation “will alone more than offset any possible increase… due to the cost of the dam”.

The spillway was finally completed in September 1934, for a final cost of $50,000. Although more than $15,000 over-budget, the dam was nonetheless lauded by federal, state, and local leaders. During the dedication ceremony on October 7th, Senator David Walsh praised the new dam not only as an “outstanding example” of the vast benefits of the FERA program, but as a “national shrine”. The
two-and-a-half hour ceremony drew a crowd of nearly 3,000. It was marked by tremendous excitement and commotion: canoeists dressed in faux-Native regalia paddled down the river as part of a “historical pageant”, an airplane whizzed overhead, the Natick Improvement Association entertained guests, and attendees enjoyed remarks from local, state, and federal lawmakers, as well as the presentation of a commemorative marker by town officials.

What About Property Rights?

Securing property rights was a primary concern of the town-appointed committee as it considered undertaking construction of the new spillway in 1934. Use the interactive map below to explore the history of several key properties related to the South Natick Dam, and the changes in their ownership over time.
The Hydroelectric Possibility

The South Natick dam had already failed, in the late-nineteenth century, as a profitable site for electricity generation. Nevertheless, the idea resurfaced in 1981, when James Knott — then owner of the canal-adjacent property east of Pleasant Street — proposed a second attempt at hydroelectric power generation which, he claimed, could power up to 200 local residences. Knott planned to divert “the entire flow of the Charles during 75 percent of the year,” channeling water through the raceway lying 500 feet upstream of the current dam. From there, water would flow a quarter mile to power two hydroelectric turbines before returning to the river.

Knott’s plan came on the heels of a Congressional act passed in 1978 which encouraged utilities to buy power from private entrepreneurs with significant tax and rate incentives. Yet his economic prospects ultimately proved unpersuasive for the majority of townspeople, who were more concerned with the site’s scenic and recreational value than its potential for power generation. Adversaries predicted that up to 2000 feet of the Charles “would all but dry up”, promptly becoming “a muddy gulch”. Erica Ball, chairman of the Natick Board of Selectmen, summed up the town’s general feelings on the matter, arguing, “It would destroy [the] most beautiful section of river. There would be fish kills. There would be a stench. It would be awful.”

Although the Boston Edison company offered Knott $.004/kWh, he was ultimately unable to procure an offer high enough to turn a profit, and the powerhouses were never built.

The Dam Today

Today, the spillway exists in the same general capacity envisioned by Natick residents in 1935. The area is still appreciated for its natural beauty and recreation opportunities, and remains a defining feature of South Natick for many locals. Yet, the dam’s future remains
uncertain. After the spillway’s completion, a small stand of white pines was planted on the earthen embankment on the south side of the river, creating a pleasant, wooded picnic area. Nearly a century later, these pines have grown so large as to threaten the stability of the earthen embankment itself, necessitating extensive renovation of the spillway.

However, after a public meeting in December 2019, the proposed renovation was put on hold in order to consider removing the spillway entirely. This alternative would eliminate the threat of future dam failure, end the continuous costs associated with dam maintenance and inspection, and help to re-establish natural wetland and flood plains. This could improve fish passage, provide more extensive habitat for endemic wildlife, decrease the frequency of harmful algae blooms (which thrive in the warm, stagnant waters of the mill pond created upstream of the spillway), and increase the river’s climate-resiliency by promoting natural flood protection. A removal project could also mean the towering pines and woodsy recreation area get to stay, as renovating the spillway would necessitate the removal of the trees and their root systems. Emily Norton, Executive Director of the Charles River Watershed Association, put it this way:

"The dam is already going to need to be rehabilitated, so there is change coming anyways. And if we’re going to make the change, let’s make a change that is aesthetically better, ecologically better, and better for public health and safety."

But many residents — even those passionate about conservation, and who appreciate the myriad economic and environmental benefits stood to be gained from the spillway’s removal — are concerned about removal. The South Natick Dam is one of the town’s most iconic landmarks, the centerpiece of a picturesque and popular park. For many, it is a personally meaningful location.
Natick residents have grown up playing in Old Town Park, fishing below the spillway, or picnicking under the white pine trees — some have even taken their wedding photos by the spillway’s picturesque waterfall. For these people, the prospect of removal represents not only the loss of a local landmark, but the loss of local and personal history.

The path forward will necessarily involve careful consideration of these myriad factors, as well as engineering and economic concerns. It is my hope, however, that lack of sufficient knowledge of the dam’s past will not represent another obstacle to reaching an ultimate decision. By providing a deeper understanding of the spillway’s historical significance, the motivations for its construction, and its past role in the social, environmental, and economic life of South Natick residents, this project may help illuminate the town’s best path forward by establishing clarity regarding the dam’s purpose and significance.

This unassuming stretch of the Charles River is no stranger to change. It has experienced periods of rapid settlement and development, economic booms and busts, droughts and floods, and eras of agriculture, manufacturing, and idle recreation. Regardless of the spillway’s future, its past has shown that this spot, whatever form it may assume, is likely to remain a focal point of life in South Natick for years to come. And whether as a continued recreation spot, site of renewed construction, or restored riparian habitat, it is doubtless that the future of this site will be profoundly shaped by its rich and extensive history.

About this Project

I am a student at Wellesley College currently pursuing a B.A. in Environmental Studies with a particular interest in conservation, sustainability, and
environmental policy. The roots of this project stretch back to the fall of last year, when I enrolled in Professor Jay Turner's U.S. Environmental History class. I was fascinated by the material and methodology, and — buoyed by the encouragement of Professor Turner and the Wellesley College Librarians — decided to use ArcGIS StoryMaps to present my final research project, which explored the environmental history of Mono Lake, California and the legacy of Los Angeles DWP water diversions from the Mono Basin.

In December 2019, following a town meeting regarding the future of the South Natick Dam, Professor Turner approached the Town Engineer, William McDowell, about the possibility of conducting an extensive research project on the history of the South Natick Dam. After receiving general consensus that such a project would be helpful to the Town, Professor Turner reached out to gauge my willingness to undertake this research. Given my interest for environmental history and water policy, I happily agreed to pursue the project as a semester-long independent study through the Wellesley College Environmental Studies department, and to share my findings with the Town in the form of this ArcGIS StoryMap.

If you have any questions, concerns, or feedback regarding this project, you can reach me at cdiamant AT wellesley DOT edu.