

History Corner:

Article below by Steve Atherton, from the Friends of Plum Island Light, Inc. 2012 Spring Newsletter, pgs. 2-3.

Bridges to Plum Island

We take it for granted ... that ride to Plum Island across the marsh and over the bridge ... but this easy access was not always the case. Prior to 1806 there was only one way to reach the island...by boat. In 1806 Plum Island was for the most part desolate and un-inhabited but for the scrub vegetation, wildlife and of course sand.

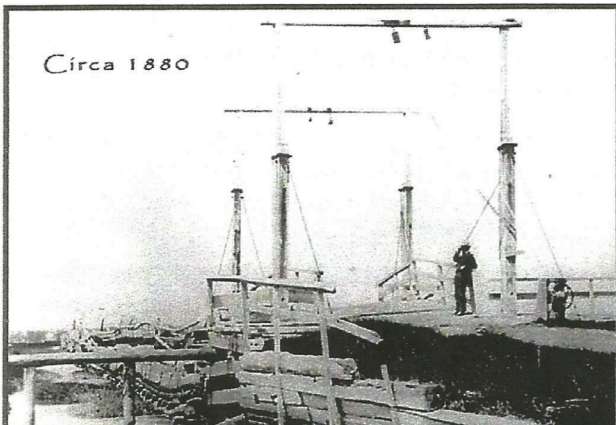
The following is a summary of the bridges to Plum Island comprised with information gathered from John Currier's "History of Newburyport", The Newburyport Herald/Daily News, Mike Bulger and Jerry Klima

... Steve Atherton

1806

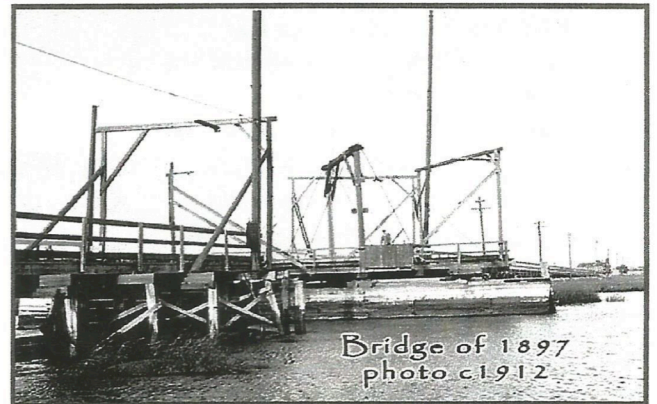
In 1804 several enterprising locals, including Ebenezer Stocker, Moses Brown and William Bartlet among others, thought the time had come to explore building a turnpike road to Plum Island including a bridge over the Plum Island River and a hotel at the end of the road to accommodate the travelers to the island. A committee was selected to study the feasibility of this project which resulted in a decision to go forward.

In February 1806 the General Court granted permission for the group to form a corporation (The Plum Island Turnpike and Bridge Corporation) and authorized them to proceed with their project. The bridge and road were completed the following summer (1806) and the small hotel completed in 1807. This was an entirely private venture. Tolls for use of the road and bridge were collected at the bridge. In 1880 you might expect to pay \$.04 for "every man or horse". Use of this bridge and road continued for about the next 90 years with ownership changing hands several times over this period. There were repairs, rebuilding and even closures on the bridge through the years, until it was replaced in 1897.



1897

By the late 1800's traffic to the island had increased and the condition of the 1806 bridge and road had greatly deteriorated. There began to be rumbles that a "new" bridge was necessary. Discussion, debate and wrangling ensued until finally...a "new" bridge was completed in 1897. It had a swing opening to accommodate boat traffic and was under the care and operation of the hotel. There were many complaints from the boating public



about the lack of a reliable opening schedule. Boating excursions down the Plum Island River to Grape Island & the Bluffs at the south end of the island was a favorite destination. On July 9th 1913 a fire partially destroyed the bridge isolating the island and limiting traffic on and off the island. A temporary foot bridge was constructed and portage across the river was offered for \$.10 in a small skiff. The hotel and cottage goers were especially inconvenienced. Repairs were made rather swiftly and cars were able to pass over the bridge by the end of July. In 1905 the bridge and roadway were taken over as a public way and the "Plum Island Turnpike and Bridge Corp" effectively ceased to exist.

1922

After some 20 years in operation, which doesn't seem like that much passage of time, it appears the bridge built in 1897 was in need of replacement or extensive repairs. Again there was a great deal of debate about what to do. New construction vs. repair the old, steel vs. wood materials, and oh by the way how much is this going to cost and who is going to pay for it? The long and short of it was a new steel draw bridge to be paid for by the various communities who received benefit from it. This is the bridge many of us remember rambling over...on our way to the island... in what seems like not too long ago. A Newburyport Herald article of March 20, 1921 reported a cost estimate of \$118,000 with a 15% overage possible. In May of 1922 the Herald

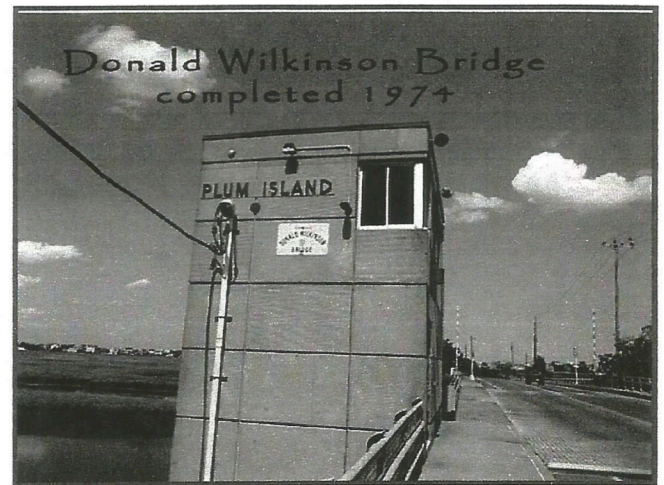


reported the bridge was near completion.

In the early 1930's a plan was proposed by WWI veterans for a memorial bridge from Salisbury Beach, across the Merrimack River to Plum Island point, connecting the two resorts. As part of the project there would also be a memorial drive from the bridge to the island's south end. The "Andrew Bill" as it was called made it to the legislature in Washington DC but was ultimately passed over.

1974

After being in operation for about 50 years, it was clear something had to be done with the bridge built in 1922. Extensive repairs or whether to build the bridge anew with updated design and materials were yet again the questions of the day. The island had become much more populated and the safety of going over the bridge severely in question... to the point that the Registry would monitor school buses traveling over the bridge daily to be sure they were not over the weight limit posted for the bridge. In 1974 our current bridge, the "Sgt Donald W. Wilkinson Bridge" was completed ...but not without extensive controversies as with the other previous "new" bridges. One additional element that had to be dealt with along with materials, funding etc...was the restricted water flow the final design created... with the concern that flooding and an altered eco balance would cause future problems. This was the fourth bridge to Plum Island since 1806. On April 26th, 1974 the new \$2.6 million dollar drawbridge was opened without fanfare.



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