THE STONE BRIDGE/RAILROAD BRIDGE AREA

Another significant gateway to Aquidneck Island, going back to its earliest days, was from the northeast. This connection with Tiverton was important as a means of getting to Fall River, New Bedford, Taunton and Boston.

Today in this area can be seen the ruins of a once-flourishing transportation system. The railroad bridge, hit by a barge in February 1988, lies forlorn, permanently open to let boats pass. Close examination of this structure shows that its remains are in very poor condition, having disintegrated due to lack of maintenance. This bridge, which is the only rail link from Aquidneck Island to the mainland, is about to be abandoned and torn down (1996) by the Rhode Island Department of Transportation. Many people feel that it would be a shame to see this railway severed forever from the mainland. The prospects of light rail and other forms of mass transit would be greatly enhanced by the restoration of this important crossing.

This Stone Bridge was the double-roller lift bridge that opened in the center. Portsmouth is at the left and Tiverton to the right in this view from the south.

The railroad bridge early in the century. The portion of the bridge at the Portsmouth side at left is fixed. The 2/3 at the right pivots 90 degrees.
The area south of the railroad bridge (right), taken from Humphrey's wharf in Tiverton. The Hummocks in Portsmouth is in the background.

Visible to the south are the remains of the last of the Stone Bridges. This crossing was abandoned with the opening of the Sakonnet River Bridge in September 1956. There had been a long history of devastating storms there, especially the hurricane of 1954. Only the abutments of this bridge remain as mute testimony to this important historic gateway to Aquidneck Island.

The Sakonnet River flows along the eastern side of Aquidneck Island. At its northern end is the Taunton River and Mount Hope Bay. The river is about ten miles long from this bay to the Atlantic Ocean. It is shallow and from three-fourths to one mile wide for most of its length. But at the area of the Stone Bridge and the Railroad Bridge the river narrows significantly. This causes this area to have a very strong tidal surge and riptide at both bridge locations. Between the bridges, in what is sometimes called "The Basin," is a calm area, about three quarters of a mile long, which is a safe anchorage for sail and power boats. The Tiverton Yacht Club is there today. The Fall River Yacht Club was there also until destroyed by the 1938 hurricane.

Due to the requirements of commerce in colonial days, the area where the Sakonnet River narrows was the location of numerous ferries during those early days of the island's history. It was also the location where colonial troops crossed from Tiverton in the summer of 1778, expecting to dislodge the British from Newport. This effort, known as the Battle of Rhode Island, failed as the British repulsed the colonial army.
Another view of the railroad bridge from the south in this postcard view. Note the train crossing the bridge.

A view of the railroad bridge (left) and the Tiverton shore from the Hummocks.
After World War II, speculation about a new bridge gave way to some serious planning. The Army Corps of Engineers developed a plan and specifications for a bridge to be built 200 feet south of the railroad bridge. This would be a high level bridge with eight spans and a vertical clearance of 65 to 83 feet above mean high water. The plans also called for the removal of the Stone Bridge, except for the east and west abutments. While this bridge, which came to be known as the Sakonnet River Bridge, was being built, the 1954 hurricane hit and the area of the Stone Bridge was devastated once again. Repairs were slow in coming. The Sakonnet River Bridge was nearing completion. Many citizens of Tiverton and the northern end of Portsmouth were outraged by the failure to significantly repair the Stone Bridge.

Finally, on September 25, 1956, the Sakonnet River Bridge was opened. It had been built by the state of Rhode Island at a cost of $9,000,000. The ribbon was cut by Governor Dennis Roberts, and the ceremonies of the day included a parade of old-time cars across the new span. A speed limit of 25 miles-per-hour was imposed at first because work was still being done.

Traditions die hard. Finally, in April 1957, the Portsmouth Town Council records state that “the Old Stone Bridge is being torn down”. Today the Sakonnet River Bridge, especially after being connected with Route 24 in the 1960s, is the primary access point from Boston, Fall River and Cape Cod to Aquidneck Island. There is a great deal of Portsmouth and Tiverton history in the vicinity of that bridge today.