



The Connecticut River

and the
Valley of the Connecticut

Three Hundred and Fifty Miles from
Mountain to Sea

Historical and Descriptive

By

Edwin M. Bacon

Author of "Walks and Rides in the Country round about Boston," "Historic Pilgrimages in New England," "Literary Pilgrimages in New England," etc.

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Illustrated
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Transcriber's note: Edwin Munroe Bacon (1844-1916), was the author and editor of numerous guidebooks of Boston and New England, including *King's Handbook of Boston*, *Bacon's Dictionary of Boston*, *Walks and Rides in the Country Round About Boston*, *Historic Pilgrimages in New England*, *Literary Pilgrimages in New England*, and more. The first 341 pages of *The Connecticut River* cover the history of the river settlements, the significant events along the river over the years, and navigation on the river. The next 122 pages present observations of the journey from the river's source in northern Vermont to the mouth of the river at Long Island Sound. The excerpt transcribed on the following pages presents the author's observations as he passes Middletown, Conn. on the way to Saybrook Point.

A note of Middletown genealogical interest: Edwin Bacon was *not* a descendant of Middletown first settler Nathaniel Bacon. He was the son of noted Universalist minister Henry Bacon (1813-1856) and a descendant of Nathaniel Bacon (1613-1692) of Barnstable, Mass.

XXIX Hartford to the Sea

Down the River by Steamboat — Old Dutch Point — Wethersfield back from the Meadows — The Glastonburys — Rocky Hill and Cromwell — Portland and Middletown at the Great Bend — The College City — Wesleyan University and Berkeley Divinity School — John Fiske in Middletown — The Straits — The Chatham Hills — Historic Mines — "The Governor's Gold Ring" — The Lymes and the Haddams — The Field Family — Brainard the Missionary to the Indians — Essex — At the River's Month.

The steamboats of the "Hartford Line," for lower-river landings and by the Sound to New York, sail from the site of the ancient Landing in Hartford, at the foot of State Street. On the way to the pier one will observe a few old warehouses suggestive of the West India trade of ships that have passed. But he must imagine the old wharves lined with vessels, "often three or four deep," when Hartford was the head of sloop navigation; the heaps of hogsheads of sugar, rum, and molasses covering them; the fleet of flatboats loading for the up-river voyage. Quiet now pervades the River front. Occasionally a fussy tow-boat or a string of slow-moving freight barges ruffles the river surface. A low-cut pleasure steamer for excursions may enliven the scene; and gayety is added by trim naphtha launches. The Sound steamboat appears quite a leviathan among this river-craft. She glides off from her dock in the late afternoon with a gentle movement as if reluctant to disturb the prevailing serenity, and as gently proceeds on the down-river course.

(Transcriber's note: In pages 448-452 the author gives his observations of the trip downstream as the steamboat passed Wethersfield and Glastonbury, and Rocky Hill.)

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From the Glastonburys and Rocky Hill the steamboat follows the River's graceful windings between green banks, in a charming region, with the townships of Cromwell on the west side, and Chatham and Portland on the east. Then the broad sweep is made to the Portland Landing, and to Middletown opposite, at the upper turn of the Great Bend. Below Rocky Hill the banks become more permanent in appearance, showing less of the river's wash than above. Cromwell has the hills from which brown stone is quarried. Portland is the quarrying place particularly of freestone. From the hills here freestone has been taken out since early colony days. The first quarry was opened on the water's edge where the stone rose high and hung shelving over the River. Portland was then a part of the territory of Middletown, as were Chatham (from which Portland was taken) and Cromwell. Once shipbuilding was a gallant industry here as well as quarrying. During the Revolution and the War of 1812, the Portland or Chatham shipbuilders launched some fine frigates and privateers. Later they turned out packets. The



first packet to sail from New York for Texas was built here in 1836. Afterward all the packets of the New York and Galveston line, begun in 1847, came out of Portland shipyards.

As the steamer draws up to the Middletown Landing the little city rises pleasantly to view in the twilight.

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Beauty of situation is but one of the charms of Middletown. John Fiske's delineation of a decade ago holds good today: "In the very aspect of these broad, quiet streets with their arching trees, their dignified and hospitable, sometimes quaint households, we see the sweet domesticity of the old New England unimpaired." In the social life of the place, as he says, there has always remained "something of the courtliness and quiet refinement that marked the days of spinning-wheels and knee-buckles." Much of this has been due to its institutions of learning, "much also to the preservation of old traditions and mental habits through sundry strong personalities the saving remnant of which the prophet speaks." If the visitor on a radiant summer morning ascends by gently rising cross-streets from Main Street parallel with the River, to High Street on the terrace a hundred and sixty feet above, and bends his gaze riverward, an enchanting landscape opens to his view. An amphitheatre of rare natural beauty spreads out before and around him. The River with its graceful bend, and broadening in front of the city to perhaps half a mile, appears a silvery stream sweeping eastward, and presently in a narrowing course, framed in delectable hills. And if later one drives northward from the city's centre up the Valley, the spectacle which John Fiske has so felicitously pictured may be enjoyed:

"About eight miles north of Middletown as the crow flies, there stands an old house of entertainment known as Shipman's Tavern, in bygone days a favorite resort of merry sleighing parties, and famous for its fragrant mugs of steaming flip. It is now a lonely place; but if you go behind it into the orchard and toil up a hillside among the gnarled fantastic apple-trees, a grade so steep that it almost invites one to all fours, you suddenly come upon a scene so rare that when beheld for the twentieth time it excites surprise. I have seen few sights more entrancing. The land falls abruptly away (Pg. 454) in a perpendicular precipice, while far below the beautiful River flows placidly through long stretches of smiling meadows such as Virgil and Dante might have chosen for the Elysian fields."

Early Middletown comprised two hamlets separated by wide stretches of meadows and designated respectively the "Lower Houses" and the "Upper Houses." The present city, in its central part, constituted the "Lower Houses," and the olden part of what is now Cromwell the "Upper Houses." These quaint terms held for more than a century and a half from the first settlements, or until 1851, when the "Upper Houses" became Cromwell. The point where Middletown was begun by the original settlers of 1650 is near the heart of the present city. The spot is seen marked by a rough boulder,

a bronze plate in the stone's face recording the data of the town's beginnings. It overlooks the River and the nearer railroad, and is overshadowed now by a Catholic institution which fronts the ancient burying-ground where the Puritan settlers sleep. The boulder placed close to the graveyard fence marks the Green of the first town centre. In the burying-ground, with its memorials of the early settlers, is seen the monument to Commodore Macdonough, the "hero of Lake Champlain" in the War of 1812, whose associations with Middletown were through his marriage and home here after his laurels were won. His death occurred at sea.

Among modern structures on the Main Street a plain stone building of official aspect with the sign "Custom House" on its front is the relic of Middletown's departed commercial importance. At one time in the latter eighteenth century Middletown outran Hartford, and was the principal port on the River, much engaged in foreign trade. Early in that century it had begun shipbuilding, and the "cheerful music of the adze and hammer" were heard in its (Pg. 455) shipyards for long after. At the opening of the Revolution it is said that more shipping was owned here than anywhere else in Connecticut. John Fiske recalls a distinct nautical flavor about the place so late as the decade before the Civil War. Meanwhile manufacturing had become permanently established. By the middle of the nineteenth century mills were numerous on the brooks and streams tributary to the River, producing various small wares, — ingenious and very useful "Yankee notions" peculiar to Connecticut manufacture, — with machines and machinery. Then Middletown, at its bicentennial, was described invitingly as a rural city where "wealth, satisfied with objects that impart refinement and rational enjoyment, must ever delight to dwell." Now its industrial statistics show a broader variety of manufacture, yet it remains the wholesome rural city with the added refinements of riper years, where all of its community as well as "wealth" must find is good to dwell.

Wesleyan University, which with the Berkeley Divinity School gives the city the academic atmosphere, has been identified with Middletown from the foundation of the institution in 1831, the first established college of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the country. Its career started in the buildings of Captain Partridge's "American Literary, Scientific, and Military Academy," which had removed to Middletown from Norwich, Vermont, in the Upper Valley, in 1824. Designed to "educate the mind and body together," under military discipline, the academy had given a certain tone to the town, with its soldierly instructors and uniformed cadets, many of whom came from the South. But after five years it returned to Norwich, and its buildings were for sale when the projectors of Wesleyan were looking about for a location. This (Pg. 456) opportunity to acquire ready made college halls, together with a liberal endowment fund which Middletown citizens subscribed, brought the institution here. As time went on, and the college expanded to university proportions, new buildings were added, and along the broad



college green on beautiful High Street, College Row arose fair and stately as it appears to-day. The Protestant Episcopal Berkeley Divinity School, although founded in Hartford, has also been identified with Middletown from its establishment as a chartered institution. Credit for its existence and its growth to its present proportions belongs and is generously given to Bishop John Williams (of the Deerfield Williams family), fourth bishop of Connecticut, who organized it as the theological department of Trinity after he had become president of that college in 1849, and who was its active head from the beginning till his death in 1899. The main building, once a commodious mansion house, constitutes a dignified central piece to the college plant.

Other mansions pleasantly placed along the River banks disappeared or were despoiled with the occupation of the water-front by railroads and its consequent transformation. One of these was the boyhood home of John Fiske. From his study window the view that "used to range across green pastures to the quiet blue waters" became obstructed by an embankment and a coal-wharf. This was the house of Fiske's maternal grandmother, where he lived from less than a year after his birth in Hartford (March, 1842) till at eighteen he entered Harvard in the sophomore class. It was in this old family mansion, browsing much in its excellent library, that he exhibited that marvellous precocity which astonished his tutors: at six, taking up the study of Latin; at seven, reading Caesar, (*Pg. 457*) and for entertainment, Rollin, Josephus, and Goldsmith's Greece; at eight, delving into Milton, Bunyan, and Pope, having already absorbed all of Shakspeare; at nine, beginning Greek; before eleven, devouring more history, Gibbon, Robertson, Prescott, and most of Froissart; in his twelfth year, writing from memory "a chronological table from B.C. 1000 to A.D. 1820, filling a quarto blank book of sixty pages"; by thirteen, taking up mathematics, teaching himself music, and singing in the church choir; at fifteen, beginning German; at sixteen, keeping his "journal" in Spanish, and reading various other modern languages; at seventeen, beginning Hebrew and dipping into science. With all this amazing reading and study, "averaging twelve hours daily twelve months in the year, before he was sixteen," he was no pedant, but a genuine youth, devoted with ardor to out-door sports and life, taking long walks and rides in the country round about, and boating on the River. He was Edmund Fiske Green till his thirteenth year. His father, Edmund Brewster Green, was a native of Delaware, and his mother, Mary Fiske (Bound) Green, of Middletown. Edmund Brewster Green had been a student at Wesleyan, class of 1837, and had met Mary Bound in the social life of the town. He became a clever journalist, and at one time was private secretary to Henry Clay. He died young, at thirty-seven, when editing a paper in Panama, in 1852. Edmund Fiske Green became John Fiske, by act of the Legislature, when his mother married Edwin W. Stoughton, the New York lawyer, of the Valley Stoughton family. He took the name of his maternal great-grandfather, John Fiske, a man of force

and character in Middletown, for half a century the town clerk.

The home of the poet Brainard, for a little time in (*Pg. 458*) Middletown, was also near the water-front. Brainard came to Middletown in 1819 and opened a law office, having reluctantly adopted the profession of his father, Judge Brainard, of New London. He proved an indifferent lawyer, given more to letters than to briefs. Several of his minor poems were written in his clientless office on Main Street. At length he abandoned his profession, when he went up to Hartford to edit the *Mirror* and engage exclusively in the hazardous literary life.

From Middletown Landing the steamer floats down the River, now sweeping eastward beside the Chatham hills. As the channel narrows below Middletown and takes its wayward course among the shoals, the pilot's skill comes into good play. At times the bow of the boat seems about to pierce the River's bank on one side and the stern to scrape the shore on the other side; but she glides onward with the ease of a canoe. About two miles out from Middletown Landing the romantic pass of "The Straits," where the River cuts boldly through the range of hills, is approached, and its gentle aspect changes to quite a majestic air. In a deep and narrow channel it swiftly flows for a mile's length between rocky banks rising to heights of from four hundred to eight hundred feet.

On the rugged north hills are historic mines, in localities yet picturesque. One, near the head of The Straits, was the "Old Lead Mine" worked by foreigners before the Revolution, and then seized by the Connecticut government, supplying large quantities of lead for the colony's use through the war. Another, beyond and above the end of The Straits, was the older and more romantic "Governor's Gold Ring." This was the place of the early investigations of John Winthrop the younger, for mineral (*Pg. 459*) wealth. Its site is on Great Hill, on The Strait Hills range, in the precincts of Cobalt, a village romantically set, which takes its name from the old cobalt mines of the region, north of Middle Haddam landing. The "Governor's Gold Ring" was in the reservation which in 1661 the town of Middletown granted to "our natch honoured Governor, Mr. John Winthrop," for the encouragement of his projects for the discovery of mines and minerals, and the setting up of works for their improvement. Here, then a lonely and dangerous wilderness, this intrepid colonial scientist used to resort, accompanied only by his servant, often spending three weeks at a time in roasting ores or assaying metals. Although no "finds" of great value rewarded him, the colonists gave the place its glittering name from their impression that he had actually obtained gold sufficient at least to be made into rings.

Night falls during the passage of The Straits, and the remainder of the steamboat's voyage is made in darkness. It is enlivened, however, by the play of the steamer's searchlight upon the banks as the several landings are approached. Thus at intervals a series of pleasant landscapes are thrown up to view as on a canvas. Middle Haddam Landing, in Chatham,



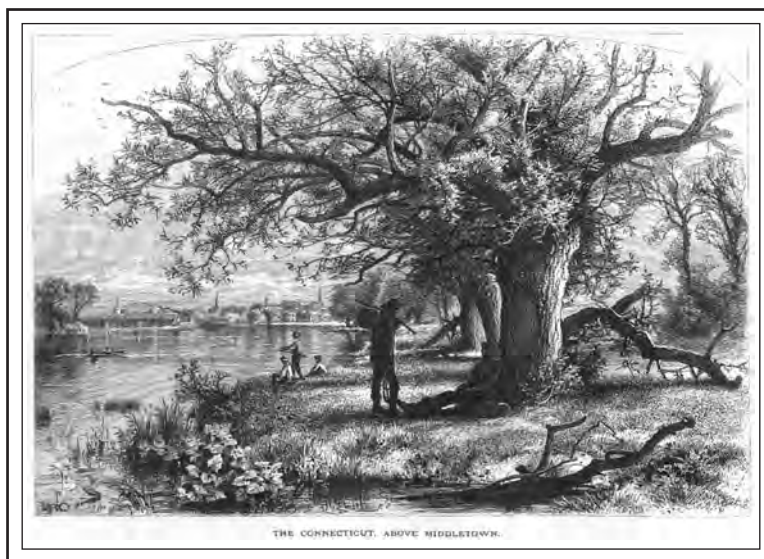
appears at the end of the River's long eastward sweep and its turn southward again, Next Rock Landing, in East Haddam, is disclosed in the mellow light. Then East Haddam Landing; and Goodspeed's, in Haddam; Hadlyme; Deep River, in Chester; Hamburg, in Lyme; Essex Landing; Lyme Landing; and finally Saybrook Point.

(Transcriber's note: In pages 460-463 the author continues his observations of the Connecticut River to Saybrook Point and out into Long Island Sound, then writes the two-paragraph conclusion below, in which he quotes Dr. Timothy Dwight IV (1752-1817). Dr. Dwight, prominent clergyman, educator, Federalist leader, and president of Yale University, wrote Travels in New England and New York, in which he introduced the kind of geographical phrenology quoted here.)

It was Dr. Dwight's observation a hundred years ago, that the inhabitants of this Valley then possessed a common character, and in all the different states through which it extends resembled each other more than their fellow citizens living on the coast resembled them. This similarity (Pg. 463) he found to be derived from their descent, their education,

their local circumstances, and their mutual interests. "People," he sagely remarked, "who live on a pleasant surface and on a soil fertile and easy of cultivation, usually possess softer dispositions and manners ... than those who from inhabiting rougher grounds acquire rougher minds and coarser habits. Even the beauty of the scenery ... becomes a source of pride as well as of enjoyment." So it appeared that there was no tract in which learning was more, and more uniformly, encouraged, or where sobriety and decorum were more generally demanded or exhibited. "Steadiness of character, softness of manners, a disposition to read, respect for the laws and magistrates, a strong sense of liberty blended with a strong sense of the indispensable importance of energetic government" were all predominant in this region.

These original traits survive, but not unchanged. The smoothing hand of time has passed over both people and landscape, softening a rugged feature here and there, removing some asperities, replacing with the beauty of cultivation the wilder beauty of nature in the rough; and yet leaving both to the inhabitants and to the scenery those picturesque qualities which, we hope, will forever be associated with the Valley of the Connecticut.



The Connecticut Above Middletown, by John Douglas Woodward, 1874.
(Magazine illustration, SMFSD Collection.)