



1972

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George W. Geib  
Butler University, [ggeib@butler.edu](mailto:ggeib@butler.edu)

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### Recommended Citation

Geib, George W., "The Essex Bridge: Transportation and Politics in the Early Republic" *Indiana Academy of the Social Sciences Proceedings* / (1972): 111-117.

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## *The Essex Bridge: Politics and Transportation in the Early Republic*

GEORGE W. GEIB  
*Butler University*

THE years that followed the War for Independence are commonly viewed as a period of rapid economic expansion. Deriving from such elements as a growing population, new foreign markets, increased capital resources, and a confident public spirit, this expansion is known to include a variety of new business ventures, notably in manufacturing and in transportation. Such new ventures are normally pictured in their business context, showing few political overtones apart from sporadic opposition by rural legislators.<sup>1</sup> This latter emphasis may be mistaken, however, because many of these early innovative business ventures faced challenges in the form of local political controversies whose dynamics are a neglected aspect of the affairs of the Confederation era. The Essex Bridge of Massachusetts is an excellent case study in this regard.

Shaped roughly like a diamond, Essex County stands in the northeastern corner of Massachusetts, extending along the Atlantic coast from New Hampshire south toward Boston. Comprising over twenty towns in the 1780s, the county then enjoyed an unusually varied economic base. Merchant trade characterized such larger towns as Salem and Marblehead; fishermen operated from half a dozen ports; commercial agriculture was found in the interior; and a widespread cottage textile industry was present. As a consequence, the county enjoyed a remarkably heavy flow of inland commerce, much of which moved to and from Boston.<sup>2</sup>

The economic position of Essex County was reflected in the wealth of its leading families and in the political power that these families enjoyed. Most notable in this regard was the Essex Junto—a group best remembered for its alleged high Federalist opposition to the Adams family, but a group that was in fact most influential in county affairs during and just after the War for Independence. Numbering perhaps a



dozen leaders of the port towns,<sup>3</sup> it was this group's members who in 1787 conceived the Essex Bridge.

The central figure in the project was George Cabot. Born in Salem in 1752, educated at Harvard, and employed by his brothers' merchant firm in Beverly in the early 1770s, Cabot served the usual apprenticeship as supercargo and captain before earning his full partnership in 1777. Originally engaged in a rum, fish, and iron trade with the southern colonies and Spain, the Cabots soon shifted most of their resources to privateering and emerged in 1783 as the most successful wartime firm in the county. These newly won riches in turn permitted George Cabot and his brothers to consider larger postwar investments.<sup>4</sup> Among such investments was a toll bridge connecting Beverly to its southern neighbor, Salem.

In the 1780s only two main roads linked northern and southern Essex County, one passing inland and the other along the coast. The latter route was shorter and perhaps smoother, but suffered from a lack of adequate transportation across the deep ocean inlet that separated Beverly from Salem. In 1787 the only available transport over this inlet was an old colonial ferry that was too small to carry bulk goods or to sail in bad weather. These considerations had forced much of the county's commerce to travel the inland route that ran through the town of Danvers at the head of the inlet. Thus a bridge over the inlet would offer benefits both to those collecting tolls and those otherwise profiting from increased trade on the coast road.<sup>5</sup>

It is noteworthy that the Essex Bridge was not the first internal improvement project in which Cabot had demonstrated an interest. In 1786 his firm had petitioned the state legislature for a charter to build a toll bridge from Boston to Cambridge—a project rejected by the legislature in favor of the famed Charles River Bridge which ran from Boston to Charlestown. Most authors suggest that Cabot became interested in the Essex venture only after this defeat.<sup>6</sup> However, if one considers the legislature's obvious dislike of the longer route to Cambridge, the Cabot petition also may have been designed, at least in part, to publicize the family's interest in bridge construction and thus to prepare the legislators for the later Essex venture.

The speed with which Cabot and his supporters completed construction of the Essex Bridge suggests that the project had been carefully planned. It formally opened on June 13, 1787 with a meeting in Salem of the prospective stockholders. There the forty-five men in attendance signed an agreement setting forth their official rationale for the bridge. The "easiest, softest, and least expensive communication" of

citizens, it argued, was "essentially necessary . . . to facilitate commerce, to encourage agriculture and the mechanic arts, and to accommodate individuals." "The populous county of Essex" would gain "by enabling the country towns to carry their articles of produce to market, and also to carry goods from thence, at a much less expense than they now do," while the southern cities would gain "markets more plentifully supplied with the produce of the country," thus gaining "new purchasers for their merchandise and more employment to their mechanics and laborers."<sup>7</sup>

The forty-five subscribers then signed up for 194 of the 200 projected shares into which the anticipated \$16,000 cost of the project was to be divided. The roster of shareholders really was one listing the leading commercial families of Salem and Beverly, with the Derbys, Thorndikes, Saunderses, and the Woodbridges especially well represented. The largest bloc of stock rested, however, with George Cabot and his Essex Junto associates, who accounted for forty-eight of the 194 shares. The Cabot family, moreover, was careful to obtain control of the corporation first by electing George Cabot president and later by having the family's firm supply the construction materials.<sup>8</sup>

Five days after the agreement had been executed the subscribers petitioned the legislature for their charter. This petition went beyond just a restatement of the general considerations set forth in the earlier one by providing a more specific description of existing adverse travel conditions. Persons going to Salem, Marblehead, and Boston, it was noted, were "subjected to the inconvenience of [taking] a long ferry or obliged to travel several miles out of their way, over a very bad and unpleasant road" in order to carry "any heavy goods or produce, the ferry being entirely useless for that purpose."<sup>9</sup> Cabot had enough copies of the petition printed so that he simultaneously could send one to the General Court and others to Essex County towns with a request for their support. On June 21 his home town of Beverly, obviously forewarned, was the first to do so and then was followed quickly by the northern coastal towns of Ipswich and Gloucester.<sup>10</sup>

In Salem, however, the proposal was abruptly rejected during a town meeting on June 25 that produced one of the largest total votes ever cast. Rev. William Bentley, a local diarist who observed the contest, noted that "the parties were warm in their debates upon exchange, which was the strongest & most numerous." From the start the bridge forces asserted that the propertied "interest of the town was on their side," but the opponents proved to be the "first majority in numbers," and carried the meeting, 187 to 164.<sup>11</sup>



Seeking to explain the unexpected defeat, Rev. Bentley attributed it to the fact that the propertied leaders of the town were "unequal . . . in the conduct of large bodies of men," a reasonable assessment in an era when democratic town meetings often were an effective vehicle for the expression of dissent. In addition, Bentley noted that the vote followed the town's sectional lines with most of the opposition coming from an area that was "westerly and northerly, joined by north fields."<sup>12</sup> Such a pattern in the 1780s meant the town was divided between its eastern area where most mercantile businesses and residences were located and its western area where many shipbuilders and most fishermen resided.

The central objection of the western townsmen proved to be Cabot's proposal to locate the bridge at the site of the old ferry. Such a location, the opposition charged, would place the bridge directly across the channel used by most of the town's fishermen and possibly force them to new and more costly anchorages. Moreover, although little was said of this publicly, they also realized that the proposed location would mean that the anticipated increase in wagon trade would flow through the more eastern business districts of Salem. To meet these problems, the opposition favored an alternate location at Orne's Point, a site several hundred yards to the west. In a memorial to the General Court drafted by a three-member committee named at the June meeting, they recommended the alternate route as more convenient and as better served by Salem's town roads.<sup>13</sup>

Two days later, Cabot's opposition in Salem found an outside ally when the town of Danvers also remonstrated against the bridge. This opposition was more predictable, because Danvers, lying at the head of the inlet across which the new bridge would run, enjoyed the wagon trade which then passed through it to and from Boston. Realizing that the bridge would divert much of this profitable trade to the east, Danvers thus was a natural opponent. But realizing also that the legislature might give little heed to questions such as income lost from tavern and livery charges, the remonstrators chose instead to do what Salem had done and argued that the area's fishing industry would be injured if the vessels then using the inlet were blocked by the new bridge.<sup>14</sup>

The legislature proved to be sympathetic. Presented with the dissenting memorials, it voted on July 6 to postpone all consideration of the project until the end of the legislative session in September when a five-member joint committee could view the two proposed sites.<sup>15</sup>

The two-month delay guaranteed that the bridge would not be built in 1787. But it also gave Cabot and his associates time to organize

a campaign against the opposition. Cabot's effort to obtain supporting petitions from other Essex towns, begun in June, was now intensified and ultimately added thirteen more towns, including Marblehead, to the list of supporters. Many of these proponents presented additional arguments for the bridge. Thus, Manchester spoke of the eighty-five widows and 135 fatherless children of the town who were dependent upon the Salem market for their cloth manufacture; Wenham spoke of the inconvenience of the bad and uneven old road through Danvers; and Newburyport spoke of its needs to sell sails and rigging in Salem.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, the debate over the bridge's location continued within Salem, where the bridge forces sought to counter the June remonstrance. Cabot's associates began by preparing elaborate engineering studies to prove the impracticability of the Orne's Point route. Then, to their delight, the legislative investigating committee arrived in early September, viewed the sites, and endorsed the Cabot plan. Later in the same month, buoyed by the committee's vote, the Cabot forces even captured a "disorderly" session of the Salem town meeting and so, by about thirty votes, had it disavow its rejection in June.<sup>17</sup>

However, in the confusion of this meeting, the victors made the serious error of failing to dissolve the three-member committee created in June to prepare the first protesting memorial. That committee, still legally empowered to "express the sense of the town," now struck back with a new petition that set forth more detailed criticism. A bridge at Cabot's site, it asserted, would severely harm the north fields area of Salem, an area which, in addition to providing the town with over forty vessels or two-thirds of its fishing fleet, also was one where new wharves, ships, and homes could be constructed. As its solution, the committee again endorsed the alternate site to the west, condemned the legislative committee's recommendation, and urged the General Court to again reject the Cabot plan.<sup>18</sup>

Against this background of remonstrance and protest, Cabot's bridge charter petition again came before the legislature. In late October, 1787 the state Senate approved it ten to seven, but on November 1 the House defeated it by a vote of 104 to 89.<sup>19</sup> Because no record remains of the debate and roll call, the reasons for the House's action remain unclear. Given the fact that this legislature, elected immediately after Shays's Rebellion, contained the largest rural, western representation of the decade, it is entirely possible that sectional animosity may have played a part. Given the fact also that the Essex Junto had been supporters of the recently defeated Governor, James Bowdoin, personalities may also have been a factor. But George Cabot himself was of the opinion



that the primary determinant of defeat was his failure to counter adequately the two town protests.<sup>20</sup> In particular, the critical three-member Salem town committee had to be dissolved.

Accordingly, two days after the House defeat the bridge forces arranged another town meeting that elected Selectman Elias Hasket Derby as its moderator and proceeded to debate the bridge sites again. The *Salem Mercury* reported that:

The meeting was so uncommonly full, and so unwieldy, and so strenuous the different parties in support of their respective opinions and interests, that it was protracted until nearly 7 o'clock in the evening. . . .

Then, "after much debate, and many unsuccessful proposals from both sides," an agreement was reached to poll the taxpayers and property holders of Salem and so let them decide the issue. Such deference to the propertied interests of Salem implied a clear victory for the Cabot forces, because none doubted where the sympathies of the propertied eastern townsmen lay.<sup>21</sup> Cabot himself, now conciliatory, agreed to incorporate in the charter the promise of a center lift to accommodate the inlet's fishermen, and then offered Danvers a small cash settlement. The legislature, duly impressed, approved the revised charter on November 17,<sup>22</sup> and the bridge itself was opened to traffic the following autumn.<sup>23</sup>

In conclusion, certain implications of this conflict need to be noted. It has become commonplace to view the emergence of political parties in the coastal areas of New England in terms of merchant-artisan rivalries—often to the exclusion of the role played by other interest groups. A good example of this position is the recent study by Van Beck Hall of Massachusetts politics in the 1780s where he offers the observation that fishermen "if interested in politics at all, supported the programs initiated by the most commercial interests in the leading commercial-cosmopolitan towns."<sup>24</sup> The obvious conflict of fishermen and commercial men over the Essex Bridge suggests such interpretations may stand in need of revision. But whether this proves to be the case or not, this study of the Essex Bridge debates will still have proved worthwhile because it revealed an unexpectedly close relationship between local politics and internal improvements in the Confederation era.

#### NOTES

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