

The Naming of MEDWAY

Gary N. Berset, Author

Fellow Medwayites, hear ye, hear ye... Over the years, many discussions have centered around the origin of the name of our town. Incorporated on October 25, 1713, there are three popular claims as presented by Francis Donovan, author of The New Grant – A History of Medway, published in 1976, pages 26-29. The name Medway is from either “settlers here coming from the vicinity of Medway on the River Kent in England brought the name of their town to our place” OR from being the ‘midway’ between Boston, Providence, and Worcester OR from being the ‘midway’ between Mendon and Dedham. Mr. Donovan concluded “the most valid would certainly be” the Mendon and Dedham scenario. He writes it was “possible” nobody from the Medway England area spoke up so the Select Committee of the Great and General Court “offered” the name “based on Clark’s Inn, described as the mid-way Ordinary.” In colonial times, a tavern was known as an ordinary.

A review of Rev. E.O. Jameson’s book, The History of Medway, Mass. 1713 – 1885, published in 1886, and Orion T. Mason’s book, The Handbook of Medway History 1713 – 1913, published in 1913, offer no explanation as to how our town was named Medway, nor does either author speculate any. How Medway received its name has never ‘officially’ been declared.

Maybe, just maybe, while discussing the possible name choices among themselves, the settlers did not come up with a single name, but instead, came up with a few names, and they just couldn’t come to an agreement on just one. Mr. Donovan does acknowledge that “from 1705 on, there had been talk of establishing a new town.” And, if the Committee did “offer” a name as Mr. Donovan suggests may have happened, their choice could very well have been after the River Medway, and not based on the location of Clark’s Inn, since the name of our town is Medway, not Midway.

Maybe too, it’s “possible” the naming was never made ‘official’ because our early settlers meeting at Clark’s Inn on lower Village Street, to establish our town, felt that it would be obvious to everyone, that the chosen name Medway came from the River Medway, in Kent County England. Keeping it simple, the name Medway came from the River Medway, and had nothing to do with the ‘midway’ to or between anything.

Our town was not named after another town. It wasn’t until 1974, with the passage of the Local Government Act of 1972, when parts of the ‘Medway Towns’ of Rochester, Chatham and Strood were ‘amalgamated’ to form the Borough of Medway, a local government district. It was developed to better serve the region sharing similar population growth and physical expansion. Said differently, until 1974, Medway in England referred only to a river, the River Medway in Kent County England, and a group of towns, the ‘Medway Towns,’ on that river.

I submit that our Medway takes its name from a river, not from any town, or reference to any other specific town. Families had settled in our area from the River Medway area. Records reflect families from Essex County settled in Dedham, the Motherland, beginning in 1635. Many migrated to Medfield beginning in 1649, and many crossed over the Charles River, settling in Medway up into the 1700s. Essex County borders Kent County, separated by the River Thames. The River Medway starts in Sussex County England and empties into the Thames Estuary. Measuring 70 miles long, it is similar to the length of the Charles, 80 miles. The ancient Britons named the river Vaga, meaning roving, wandering. Later, the Saxons added the syllable mad, meaning middle, as the river ran through much of the middle of Kent County.

As we all know, early settlers from England often named their new towns after the towns and landmarks they left behind in Old England. As the crow flies, Dedham, in Essex County England, is only 59 miles away from the River Medway. Medfield, Medefield derived from Medefeld or 'Meadow feld', later Metfield England, along with Wrentham England, are both less than 100 miles from the River Medway. Notice too, the naming of Medfield, the town we separated from, had nothing to do with midfield or the middle of anything.

I argue, it is very likely that some of our early settlers in town, having their roots in both Kent and Essex Counties, reached a compromise regarding the naming of our town. Mr. Donovan writes, "Fifty persons are listed as founders of our new town." I counted 37 families identified on a map of our new town at the time we were incorporated. I am confident that all of their roots did not lead back to the same community in England. I am equally confident that there were some that strongly wanted to name their new town, their new home, after their old one. Instead of selecting a town's name, the River Medway was agreed upon because it was a name that represented a handful of communities, and many of our original settlers were very familiar with its reputation. It would be a perfect solution. It would satisfy many. It was the best fit.

By 1713, the River Medway had already played a major role in world history. It is steep in naval history beginning when the Romans waged the Battle of Medway during the 1st Century. Even today, the Battle is described as one of the two most important in British history. From the 15th Century up until 1984, Chatham, a 'Medway Town,' housed one of Britain's major naval dockyards. The river had already served the 'Medway Towns' for many centuries, providing family life, commerce, employment, recreation, in addition to many other necessities. It had always served as a means for transporting goods and services along the river, and out into the English Channel and North Sea.

We clearly are not the midpoint between Mendon and Dedham. As the crow flies, Mendon is 7.9 miles away and Dedham is 13.92. As the horse gallops, via the old road to Mendon now Village Street, and the Dover Road route in Millis over Brastow's Bridge since the 109 crossing over the Charles River area was non-existent at the time, Mendon is 9.9 miles away and Dedham is 17.6. All these distances are calculated from Timothy Clark's Inn at 54 Village Street to the town halls in each town. And, if the founding fathers wanted it to mean the midway, or the middle, or the midpoint, with Clark's being referred to as the 'mid-way Ordinary,' I'm convinced our town would have 'officially' been named Midway, and it wasn't.

The other purported claim is that the name of our town is based on it being the geographic center of the three settlements, Boston, Providence and Worcester. This too makes no sense based on the status of these three places at the time we incorporated. In 1700, Boston was clearly a major settlement in the New World, but had a population of only 6,700, half of Medway's population today. In 1700, Providence, a religious escape destination, was a farming/fishing plantation. It burned to the ground, except for two dwellings, in the King Phillip Wars in 1667. Their first church and burial ground were not even around until 1700. Worcester, on the other hand, had a much different beginning. Their first settlement was abandoned in 1673 during the King Phillip Wars. Their second settlement was abandoned in 1701. Their third settlement, which became permanent, wasn't until 1713, and wasn't 'officially' established as a town until 1722, nine years after us.

When our early settlers debated on the naming of our town, being located anywhere near the middle of these three communities, a future cradle of liberty, a religious establishment and an unstable settlement, was the furthest thing from their minds.

The Act of Incorporation presented to the Massachusetts General Court for approval reads, “the new town by the name of Medway the River to be the Bound betwixt the Two Towns,” Medway and Medfield. Notice the words capitalized in the original document... Medway, River, Bound, Two Towns... all that was considered significant. The Act further states that the inhabitants of the West side have “labored under many hardships and Difficulties by reason of Separation by the River to Enjoy Equal benefit and town privileges” with their neighbors. Notice here the capitalized words... West, Difficulties, Separation, River, Enjoy Equal. The difficulty crossing the river, from one side to the other, was the major reason for our separation from Medfield, for the establishment of our new town.

The Charles River defined our eastern boundary (Old Grant/East Medway/Millis) with Medfield, and our southern boundary with Wrentham, later to become Norfolk and Franklin. In addition to setting the boundary between the old and the new, it began the challenge to our early merchants, of harnessing its power, starting with Nathaniel Whiting’s Gristmill, on the sight of the old Sanford Mill, in 1711. Hoping to replicate the success the River Medway had on its towns, much emphasis was placed on our river, the Charles River, the future lifeblood of our community.

As Mr. Donovan points out in his book, over the years, industry flourished along our river, falling nearly 10 feet from the West Medway Dam to the Village Street flats at Walker Street. Theophilus Clark established his sawmill on the river, across from the head of Oakland Street, along with Ichabod Hawes’ sawmill and forge, shortly after Whiting’s Gristmill. Others noted that followed along the river included Samuel Bullen’s mill that manufactured ‘fulling’ cloth which increased its weight and bulk.

John McGinnis had a boot shop. Samuel Clark had a box factory. J.W. Thompson’s boot factory was across from the head of School Street. George Barber, Jr. built his dye house near the Eaton & Wilson Batting Mills building on the river down at the corner of Walker Street. The Campbell Brothers Paper Mill was established up at the West Medway Dam, just above where Chicken Brook enters the Charles.

In summation, Medway means Medway. It is most likely that our town was not named based upon its location relative to any other community, but instead, after the River Medway. Our founders, recognizing the rich history and its impact on the lives of all those in the ‘Medway Towns,’ chose the River Medway. It was a fitting name, the most logical choice, for the new Town of Medway.

Gary Berset was born in Framingham, moved to Medway in December of 1951 as an infant, and has lived here ever since. He is one of six children, a middle child of George (Judd) and Anita. The family was raised at 29 Broad Street and all are graduates of Medway High. He is married to Eileen whose family moved to town after she finished the third grade. Gary and Eileen have two children, Erin and Jason. They too graduated from Medway. Although their kids have since moved away from Medway, all are forever “MUSTANGS.”

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