



Photo A: British Soldier Memorial



*Photo B: Statue of the
American Minute Man*

American Tourist Viewpoint

The two boys and their mother saw the Bridge in a distinct way. To them, the Bridge was about American history and American pride. Even the young boys showed an understanding of the Battle of Concord story through their ‘reenactment.’ During their game both boys took on the role of the American Minute Men, since they saw the colonialists as heroes. Although this association with the Bridge and Minute Men may seem childish, I found that many adults also felt a deep connection to the Bridge’s history.

The Americans that I talked to came from across the country with a similar purpose. They saw the Bridge as a place that connects them to their heritage. One of the men that I interviewed said, “the revolutionary dawn happened right here.” For him, the Bridge tells a powerful story of the past. It serves as the intersection of past and

present. By knitting both times together, the Bridge no longer is just a place, but also a symbol of America. It becomes capable of communicating condensed meaning that defines both the past and present (Low 2003: 19).

One of the women I spoke to saw the bridge as part of her own identity. She said, "I came here to better understand my *own* past." She has identified herself as American and, therefore, she felt that she shared the same history as the Bridge. She hoped that by being physically present at the place, she might reconnect with herself and her past.

Americans also identified the Bridge as a symbol of national pride. It was here that Colonialists began to overturn bigger and stronger Britain. The Bridge was an emblem of what Americans were capable of doing. The first guide I talked to exemplified this understanding. He said, "This is where the country took its first steps of independence. That's a powerful symbol." However, it was not these words that struck me, but the way that he said them. His voice was strong, powerful, and proud. He stood up a little straighter, and looked me straight in the eye. It was clear that he viewed the Bridge as something of which he was a part. For many Americans the Bridge has become part of their individual identity, connecting each other in a web of common past.

International Tourist Viewpoint

My British friend from last summer saw the bridge very differently than American tourists. He remembered our walk and interactions more than the history of the Bridge: he felt removed from the Bridge's history. Our trip to the Bridge had not

been about discovering and learning American history, but rather seeing Concord through my eyes. How the Bridge was displayed affected his social memory.

Other international tourists, who travel thousands of miles to visit the Bridge each year, may have a personal connection to the place while others come to learn. This phenomenon has become more popular since I moved to Concord eleven years ago, primarily because of the ease of travel. However, it is important to note that this has also changed the types of social memory associated with the Bridge. The 'international tourists' category feeds into a broad generalization, but on the whole, their reason for coming to the Bridge is different from that of the American tourists and the Concord locals. Most of the international tourists who come do not view the Bridge's history the way the Americans do, but through their own society's eyes. Massay explains this idea, arguing that "the past of a place is as open to a multiplicity of readings as the present" (1995: 185). The multitude of perspectives about the past creates more interpretations and questions about the present. The guide that I spoke to said that the international visitors asked questions about aspects of the Bridge that the American tourists rarely noticed.

The most significant of these aspects is the memorial to the British soldiers. This is the first memorial that one encounters while walking down the hill to the Bridge. The international visitors wanted to know why the Americans built a memorial to the "enemy" and how modern Americans felt about it. To these tourists, the memorial quickly became as significant as the Bridge itself. It showed a piece of history that had been lost. The memorial didn't contradict the meaning of the Bridge, but it did not

represent American pride that so many Americans attached to the Bridge and place (Cresswell 2006)

The international tourists' social memory of the Bridge is largely impacted by the Concord Museum. It is here that the story of the American Revolution is told through the eyes of the American Colonialists. It is important to emphasize that this is *American* version of the events. It struck me that the history was told through a variety of items and pictures that connected to the Bridge. There was one of the guns fired in the first attack, and pictures of what the American Minute Man would have looked like. Within these items was the past, displayed for a particular purpose (Wilson 2010: 5). These items were meant to educate, but it struck me that they were also lined with national pride. As I tried to step into the international visitors' perspective, I felt disconnected. The items became just history. They told an interesting story, but that was all. There was no longer a deeper memory that associated emotions to the events. My attempt to see these items through an international visitor's lens apparently was quite accurate. The Museum guide told me that most of the international tourists come to understand America's history, but that's all.

Concord Locals' Viewpoint

To me, and the other locals of Concord, the Old North Bridge holds a very different meaning. It no longer represents only American history, but is a symbol of our hometown and the memories that surround it. I remember getting stuck in a

thunderstorm while running across the Bridge, and kayaking under it with friends during the summer. These memories help me see the Bridge not as a symbol of American pride and democracy, or as a symbol of history, but as part of my life. For me, its sense of place has transformed (Massay 1995: 188). The Bridge is no longer a focal point; instead, it becomes a background element of daily life. I am aware of the Bridge's history, and I have visited the Concord Museum many times. However, these experiences do not conjure up the emotions and experiences that American tourists may associate with these places. My personal experiences dominate these places. Unlike the American tourists, I don't go looking for my identity at the Bridge. Instead, the Bridge has slowly become a symbol of my own home, my sense of belonging.

While doing my research I experienced several locals' perspectives of the Bridge. One of the most unusual happened during my last trip to the Bridge, when a young boy came up to me and thrust his brightly colored basket at me.

"Hi," he said, "My name is Tyler. I am collecting Easter eggs. I am going to get a lot."

His mother came over to join our conversation and explained that the town organized an Easter egg hunt around the Bridge every year. It had become part of their family tradition. Quickly the boy ran off, searching behind the memorials and under the Bridge for the brightly colored plastic eggs.

This encounter gave me a brief insight into the way that the boy saw the Bridge. He was too young to understand all the history behind the sight, but that the place still held a significant meaning to him. It was home to Easter egg hunts, and as a result, the

place had taken on the identity of Easter, fun and traditions. I pictured him driving past the Bridge, face pressed against the car window, asking when Easter would arrive

Another local I encountered was a woman who recently moved away from Concord. She came back every year to visit her family, and inevitably visited the Bridge. However, the Bridge played a very different role in her life than the young boy searching for Easter eggs. She saw it through the relationship with her sister who was married there only three years before. She pointed to the spot that the ceremony was held, smiling as she recounted the whole event. The Bridge was engulfed in the nostalgia of her old home and close family.

Like me, these people's personal memories overlap with the Bridge's history to create juxtaposition. Neither memories are lost completely, but the personal memories outweigh the distant historical memories. This is because by directly experiencing a place we are able to better "create it". Miles Richardson better explained this concept by saying, "Through our actions, our *interactions*, we bring about the world in which we then are; we create so that we may be, in our creations" (2003: 74). Once again, this applies to social memory. Since we define the world through our knowledge, and our experiences, everyone will understand the bridge differently.

Conclusion

I have categorized, and defined the people that come to the Old North Bridge as American tourists, international tourists, and locals. These are broad generalizations. Each group can be split into further categories, particularly international tourists.

However, due to the short length of this essay, I cannot cover all the divides I observed. However, this is further highlighted the “dualism” of a place. As Massay (1995) emphasizes, places are always hybrids.

My fieldwork has provided me with a dualistic experience. The more time I spend at the Bridge and encounter people from all walks of life, the more I am forced to recognize that I can never fully understand all of the dimensions of a place. The Old North Bridge may be a national symbol, but it holds many more definitions. None of these definitions are wrong, but they do provide different understands of the same place.

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