

BEST BIKE RIDES *in* NEW ENGLAND

*Backroad Routes for Cycling
the Northeast States*



DAVID SOBEL



Land of Lakes

Chesham, Nelson, Harrisville, and Dublin, New Hampshire

DISTANCE: 19.3 miles

ELEVATION GAIN: 1465 feet

CHALLENGING

A two-in-one ride. Choose either one longer ride or two shorter options. Three lost villages, ponds, and lakes abound. The heart of New England.



Drift into the village of Harrisville at dusk on a January evening. It's snowing lightly, flakes wafting down. Squint a bit so you don't see the utility lines and poles and ahhhh, you've slipped through the time portal back to the late 19th century. Weavers are tucked into their woodstove-warmed homes, the mill is just finishing up burning its one cord of wood on this frigid day when it never got much above 10° F. Harrisville is a National Historic Landmark and one of the most architecturally intact small brick mill villages you'll find anywhere in New England. It's easy to feel long ago and far away here. The same is true of the village of Nelson—it feels like a frozen-in-time Currier and Ives print.

Most likely you won't be biking in midwinter, but you'll still get the lost

village feeling arriving in Nelson and Harrisville in the other three seasons. On the continuum of 1-10, 1 being completely found, like downtown Manchester (VT or NH), to 10 being *Brigadoon*-ish lost, Harrisville is about a 7, pleasantly lost, remarkably preserved. Nelson is about an 8—it doesn't have businesses in the village the way Harrisville does. You rarely pass through these places on the way to anywhere else. Don't miss the epicenter of craft weaving in North America at Harrisville Designs or the culinary delights of the Harrisville General Store. And, if you can arrange to be in Nelson on a summer Monday night, be sure to attend the contradance, a well-preserved tradition in the lost New Hampshire hills.

It's best to arrive in Nelson and Harrisville on bike, letting the village escapes unfold slowly, at a horse-drawn carriage pace. So you'll start in Chesham, one of the villages of the town of Harrisville. Park at the Wells Memorial School in Chesham or across from the church in a wide gravel lot. Head north on Chesham Road for a quick downhill. At the nicely preserved Chesham Depot, bear right and east along the shores of Chesham Pond toward Harrisville. At the outlet for the pond dam, there's a new interpretive panel that provides a rich history of the area.

In brief, it's interesting to understand all these ponds and reservoirs you're passing by. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, rural electrification came to southwestern New Hampshire. To provide hydropower, many of the lakes and ponds in Harrisville, which sits up high on the watershed boundary between the Merrimack and Connecticut Rivers, were dammed to provide a constant flow of water to a hydroelectric station in Marlborough. Silver Lake, Chesham Pond, Seaver Pond, Russell Reservoir,



ONE OF MANY MONADNOCK VIEWS—THIS ONE ACROSS CHILD'S BOG

and Howe Reservoir were all dammed, or had the dams raised, as part of this rural electrification. It was like a miniature TVA project. And it's why there are so many wildlife-rich and swimmable bodies of water on the western, Chesham end of Harrisville.

After Chesham Pond, you'll take a left on Seaver Road and gradually climb toward Silver Lake. (*For the shorter Harrisville Dublin loop, continue straight here and rejoin directions at 9.3 miles in At a Glance on page xxx.*) You'll cross the dam at Seaver Pond (no houses, good swim spot) and then climb through the meadows of the old Seaver Farm. Make sure you turn around to take in the mondo view of Monadnock across cleared fields when you get to the remaining barn. Hitch left to come out on the paved road at the Silver Lake outlet.

Silver Lake Land protection: Silver Lake is one of the choice lakes in

southern New Hampshire (along with Nubanusit and Dublin Lake in these parts). All of them are spring-fed, deep, and crystal clear. Edgar Seaver owned this farm and much of the land on both sides of Silver Lake. When Edgar died, the property around Silver Lake had already become a premier summer cottage destination for banana belt Keene residents, where it's always 5–10 degrees hotter in the dog days of summer. Local conservationists were concerned that more summer houses would sprout up on all this lakeshore property, and so land protection began in earnest. The meadows of this farm (worth millions on the open market) and much of Edgar's land have since been put into conservation easements through the hard work of the Harris Center and the Silver Lake Land Trust. Because of their efforts, we can all appreciate the still pristine water quality of Silver Lake.

Turn right on Breed Road (so-named on the maps—around here we just call it the Silver Lake Road) and climb past an orange house and then descend to the shore of Child’s Bog. This was a bog before it was logged and dammed as part of the rural electrification project mentioned earlier. At the end of Child’s Bog, look right for another grand Monadnock view.

At the Nelson Road, turn left. After about 1.25 miles, pass Hardy Hill Road and continue straight ahead past a swamp and then an expansive view across marshlands. You’ll climb a bit, bend around a corner, and then Brigadoon—the Nelson town green, the stately

church, the tiny old library and the new one connected to the town hall. It’s lovely in its simplicity. Sit on the bench and take it in. Imagine the town hall alive with fiddle music, rhythmic floor stomping, twirling couples, group gaiety. In sociological terms it’s called *collective effervescence*—the sense of communion or fusion that occurs when a group of people are enjoying themselves together. You’ll feel it if you return here for a dance.

Back in the saddle, it’s a short steep climb uphill to the village cemetery. Turn in here. This scene evokes the third act of *Our Town*, looking down on the village from the cemetery. Completely serene. Past the cemetery, take the left hand fork



THE BRICK VILLAGE OF HARRISVILLE—A NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK

on Hardy Hill Road and slide back down to the Nelson Road heading south. It's another nice downhill drift on pavement back to the Child's Bog corner.

Continue straight on the Nelson Road along the north shore of Child's Bog, climb a bit, and then descend to the shores of Harrisville Pond. (Count them—this is the fifth pond or lake you've passed in the last 8 miles.) The village appears ahead of you across the pond. At the juncture with Chesham Road (big yellow house on the corner, slightly out of place—long story), bear left. (*For a shorter loop excluding Dublin, turn right here and head back to the car.*)

Note the seemingly floating public library on your left, and the brick mill buildings now revitalized and housing diverse small businesses. Harrisville Designs, in the center of the village, is the epicenter of the craft weaving world in the United States. Make a quick stop at the Harrisville General Store for iced coffee or to decide whether to come back here for a post-ride lunch or snack.

From the store head east out of town, a quick plummet past the mill complex, paralleling Nubanusit Brook. Skip the two left-hand turns down both sides of Skatutakee Lake and the right turn to the dump and start the long, slow (2 miles, 250 feet) climb up the Dublin Road.

This section is only mildly scenic, but it's a reasonably pleasant slog. Sometimes we save stories or new jokes to keep us occupied on this climb. Or try this—are prime numbers evenly distributed in each 10-number span (i.e., 1–10, 11–20, 21–30, and so on) up to 100? Math puzzles like this are good for long climbs. Once you get to the absolute top of this climb, at the 35 mph sign, the views to the east get better. The Wapack Range stretches from Temple Mountain up to South and North Pack Monadnock.



TREASURE HUNT: SEE IF YOU CAN SPOT THIS ALMOST-AFLOAT, TINY PUBLIC LIBRARY

Meanwhile, you'll pass the Dublin School's Nordic ski network on your right and you can look for signs of one of New Hampshire's lost downhill ski areas in this stretch. After you pass the Dublin School campus, turn right and then right again on Old Common Road for a short steep climb. At the top, bear left on Frothingham Road to intersect Route 101.

Detour: *For a scenic detour, at the top of this hill, bear right staying on Old Common Road, pass Old Pound Lane, and a bit further along, take a left on a lane through the cemetery with great views west across Dublin Lake toward*

Monadnock. Pause here and find the gravestones that illustrate the tragedy of Jacob and Martha, who had four infants perish at an early age.

Cross Route 101 to get onto Lake Road. Now it's gravy for most of the rest of the ride. Amble around the lake, enjoying the manses of the golden era of the late 19th century. Mark Twain, William James, Abbott Thayer, and Rockwell Kent all rusticated here, enjoying the sparkly water and the paintable landscapes. Dublin, New Hampshire, whose town center you've just skirted because it's not a lost village, is the highest town center in New England at about 1400 ft., so enjoy the rarefied mountain air. Take a right at the end of Dublin Pond and pass the public boat landing. Lots of good places to slip into the pristine waters along here, should you be so moved. Lake Road dead ends into Route 101, and here you have to face the music: real traffic. But you're only on 101 for about a half-mile, and it's a great downhill cascade.

Swoop past the Friendly Farm (pettable lamps, chicks, goats) and look for a cluster of white buildings (Worcester's Antique Autos) on your right that landmark the turn. Dive down the rabbit hole as you turn right off of 101 onto Macveagh Road—fun to carry speed for the next little uphill, but be ready for the change from asphalt to sometimes loose gravel. There's a beautiful, recently reclaimed meadow, with a cordwood operation at the far end, and then you cross the town line from Dublin back into Harrisville. The next 1.5 miles provide one of our favorite stretches of backroads biking in the Monadnock Region. After Hill Number 4 (which heads uphill to your right), you enter an elegant, downhill hemlock tunnel that goes on and on. In the right autumn light, with sun dappling through the dense hemlocks, there's a psychedelic, strobe effect. This languorous descent, mildly otherworldly, pops you out into shockingly green meadows on

the right and a redwing blackbird marsh on the left.

At the four corners at Macveagh and Brown Roads, take a left on the Brown Road. It's deep woodsy until one last hill up to the old village center of Pottersville (so lost you won't recognize it as an old village center) with a mixture of old Capes (see if you can figure out which one the author lives in), new houses, and lots of meadows. Then it's a satisfying plummet downhill back to Wells Memorial School and the church.

DINING OPPORTUNITIES

The Harrisville General Store is a destination lunch spot. You'll find a great range of scrumptious breakfast sandwiches with locally sourced everything named after all the nearby lost villages. I recommend the Harrisville with Jodi Farwell's sausage. Make sure you ask for a side of green salsa. The cheeseburger on ciabatta is similarly delish. There are a couple of hand-crafted soups per day, to-die-for desserts, a great Mediterranean tuna salad, and beautiful sandwiches. You can sit on the porch overlooking the astutely restored and repurposed mill buildings. Notice that you don't notice cigarettes or lottery tickets for sale.

Even if you're not hungry, don't skip the store. There's a rebirth of the general store across northern New England, blending old-time community hub (drop in for beer, milk, and bread) with urban culinary refinement. Check out other rides in this book that take advantage of the Guilford Country Store in Guilford, Vermont, and the Petersham Market in Petersham, Massachusetts.

Dublin General Store. Everybody raves about the deli counter at the Dub Gen, giant \$1.50 chocolate chip cookies and an interesting sandwich menu and good take out. My son swears by the curried chicken salad wrap. It's owned by Andy and Michelle, and she always has different hair—check out the current



NO UTILITY LINES ALONG MACVEAGH ROAD MEAN YOU RIDE THROUGH A COZY HEMLOCK AND MAPLE TUNNEL

style. But the Harrisville General Store versus the Dublin General Store is like the Red Sox versus the Yankees, and I'm a Harrisville resident, so you know my preference. But really, they're both great.

SWIMMING OPPORTUNITIES

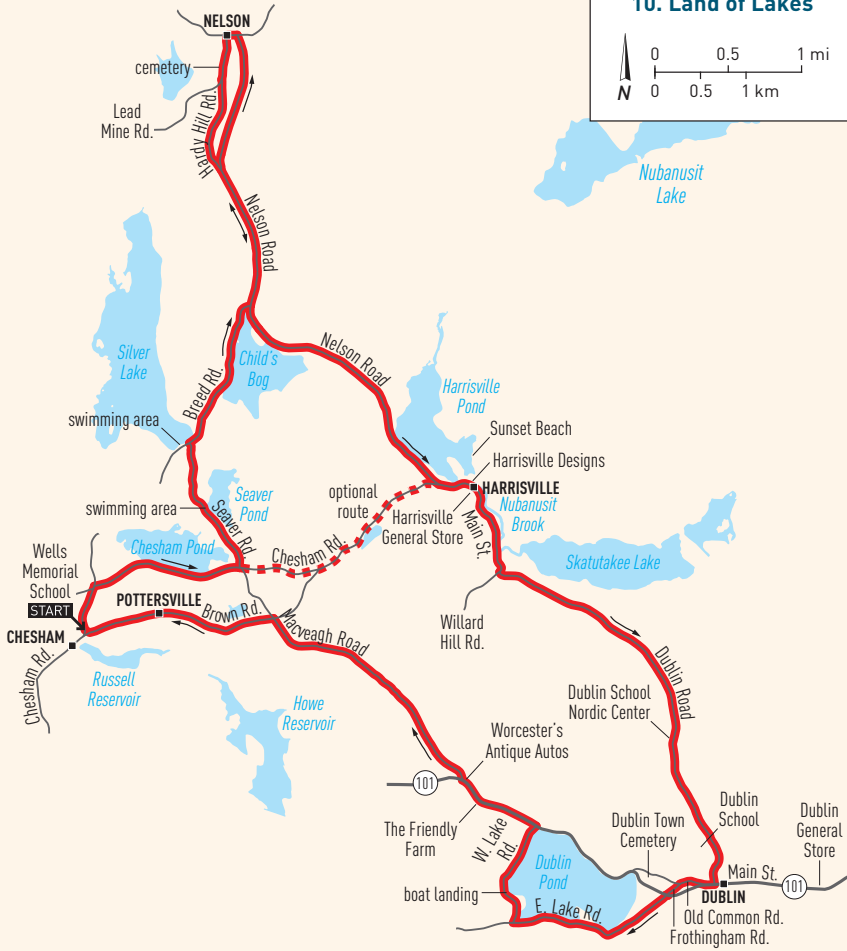
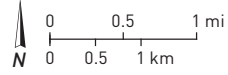
If you're up for a swim, find your way to **Sunset Beach** on the backside of **Harrisville Pond** past Peanut Row. Walk. It's only a quarter-mile from the store to this sandy, shallow, kid-friendly beach. And come late in the day to enjoy the reason for the name. New Hampshire town beaches are one of the under-the-radar joys of living in them thar hills of the Granite State. (Sorry Vermont—you excel in many ways, but you just don't have the same plenitude of lakes and town beaches as New Hampshire.) Most town beaches are residents-and-guests-only, but this is rarely enforced, and there are no beach sticker requirements. Most towns around here have so many summer

residents that no one will be suspicious of your flatlander accent.

You passed **Silver Lake** early on your ride. It's our go-to swim spot on summer evenings. Something so refreshing about the crystalline green water. The downside is that on weekends, it has an active boat launch, so there's often the stink of outboards, and parking is at a premium. But, mid-week, at dusk, after a nice sweaty ride, you can almost have it to yourself. Find the stone steps at both ends of the parking lot and slip beneath the silvery surface. Loons might call. Your skin will feel like freshly laundered sheets after a swim here.

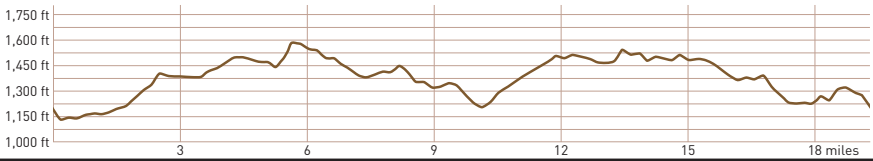
If Silver Lake is too crowded, park on the side of the road by the boat ramp on **Seaver Pond**. Or there's a parking area on the other side of the dam, and you can follow a bit of trail back to a rocky point. Both are fine swim spots.

10. Land of Lakes



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ELEVATION PROFILE



AT A GLANCE Land of Lakes: Chesham, Harrisville, Nelson, and Dublin

DISTANCE: 19.3 miles

ELEVATION GAIN: 1465 feet

CHALLENGING

0.0	Park at Wells Memorial School or across from the church on Chesham Road. Start pedaling northeast and downhill on Chesham Road.	9.3	At junction with Chesham Road, continue straight ahead into village.
0.3	At Chesham Depot, bear right to stay on Chesham Road.	9.6	Mandatory stop at Harrisville General Store. (Option to cut off Dublin loop and head back to Chesham). After store, continue downhill on Main Street past turn-offs to Lake Skatutakee and Harrisville Depot.
1.4	Turn left on Seaver Road. Turn left at top by lake outlet and . . .	10.3	At junction with Willard Hill Road bear left uphill on Dublin Road.
2.4	Arrive at Silver Lake, turn right on Breed/Silver Lake Road.	13.1	Turn right on Route 101.
3.4	At end of Child's Bog, turn left on Nelson Road. (Option to cut off the Nelson lollipop and turn right to go to Harrisville.)	13.2	Right on Old Common Road.
5.4	Arrive at Nelson Village. Soak it in. Then head south, uphill on Hardy Hill Road.	13.4	Left on Frothingham Road.
5.8	Bear left at junction with Lead Mine Road to stay on Hardy Hill Road.	13.5	Cross Route 101 onto East Lake Road. Beautiful lake views.
6.4	Bear right onto Nelson Road.	14.7	Right on West Lake Road.
7.4	At Child's Bog junction, continue straight ahead on Nelson Road.	15.5	Left on Route 101. (Careful at this intersection.)
		16.1	Right onto Macveagh Road.
		17.9	Left on Brown Road.
		19.3	Arrive back at Wells Memorial School and church.