

## THE OLD COVERED WOODEN BLENHEIM BRIDGE

### HISTORY of the Old Covered Blenheim Bridge

(The following was compiled by Helen C. Bliss, Town Historian in the book HISTORY of the Town of Blenheim 1797-1959 with additional information from the Blenheim History 1710-1991 compiled by Fanchon Dewell Cornell and Alicia Cornell.)



The Old Covered Wooden Bridge at North Blenheim, spanning Schoharie Creek at the eastern end of the village, will pass its 100<sup>th</sup> milestone this year – 1955 – in hardy retirement.

The history of this bridge is fascinating, indeed! Long ago, towns couldn't afford to build bridges, so private enterprises took on the jobs, forming companies. On April 19, 1828, an act was passed by the N.Y.S. Legislature to incorporate the Blenheim Bridge Company. The first charter expired October 8, 1857, and was extended 30 years by a petition of Mr. George W. Martin and Mr. William Fink, Directors. Around 1850, Major Hezekiah Dickerman came to Blenheim from Connecticut, and, so great was his interest in public affairs, that he was elected Supervisor of the Town in 1851. He built a tannery in the village, and the hemlock bark used in the process of tanning the hides, was obtained from the trees on the opposite side of the creek. Forging the river was very hard on his horses and wagons. Mr. Dickerman, President and shareholder of the Bridge Company in 1854, decided (along with Mr. Martin and Mr. Fink) that at last there was enough money to build a bridge. While the company was looking about for prospective contractors, it was learned that a good builder, Nicholas Montgomery Powers, was expected shortly at Schoharie to repair the covered bridge there, and he was immediately requested to take the job in Blenheim. Mr. Powers was born (1817) in Pittsford, Vermont, and resided at Clarendon. He was gaining quite a reputation in his field, for he had already built many bridges, but this one was to be his masterpiece.

In 1855, the bridge was completed, at a cost of \$6,000. Its main feature the SINGLE, center arch on which the bridge relies for strength, stretches in a three-rib segment from the abutments clear up to the ridgepole of the roof. It has three trusses; a large one enclosing the arch in the center, and two side trusses 27 feet apart, of lesser height. This divides the bridge into two lanes; sometimes it is called a “double-barrel” or “double-tunnel” bridge. The trusses are a series of all-wooden “X’s” in boxes; a system devised and patented in 1830 by Lt. Col. Stephen H. Long. This patent was used and improved upon; thus we see 25 years later that Mr. Powers used bolts and washers to connect the timbers and braces. It is said that 3,600 pounds of bolts and 1,500 pounds of washers were used. The huge span is constructed mostly of virgin pine, with the mighty arch of oak; furnished by William M. Granby, Jacob Shew, John Hager, and Peter I. Hager. It is estimated that 94,000 ft. (127 tons) of lumber was used. The ridgepole is 232 feet long, the truss is 228 feet and the clear span is 210 feet. Mr. Powers was paid \$7.00 a day (\$2,000 total) and had the privilege of picking his own men; the workers received \$1.00 a day.



This curious structure was not built out over the stream as most people imagine, but was constructed piece by piece back of the present village. Then began the difficult task of taking the giant bridge apart and erecting it over the stream. Temporary scaffolding (bents) was set up across the river. One young man, called a “climber” because he worked high over the fast water, was killed, when a heavy log “bent” fell. When the bridge was completed, and the trestles were removed, Mr. Powers was so confident that it would not crash into the river or even sag two inches, that he sat on the roof, risking his life upon his work. From the peaked roof, he remarked, “If the bridge goes down, I never want to see the sun rise again!” But the bridge remained sound and straight. It has retained the “camber” of its long roof, as perfect today, as it was then.

With an open span of 210 feet, it had the longest span of any single-span covered bridge in the world.



For many years, following that dramatic day in 1855, when it was opened to horse-drawn traffic, the bridge was in constant service as a toll bridge. A toll-keeper lived in a small house adjoining the bridge. At one time, footmen were charged one cent and teams 12 cents.

After the Blenheim Bridge Company was disbanded, the span was purchased by Mr. Dickerman, who presented it to his daughter, Mrs. Charles Waite of Jefferson County, N.Y. Later, a grandson came to Blenheim and collected the toll from the bridge once a year.

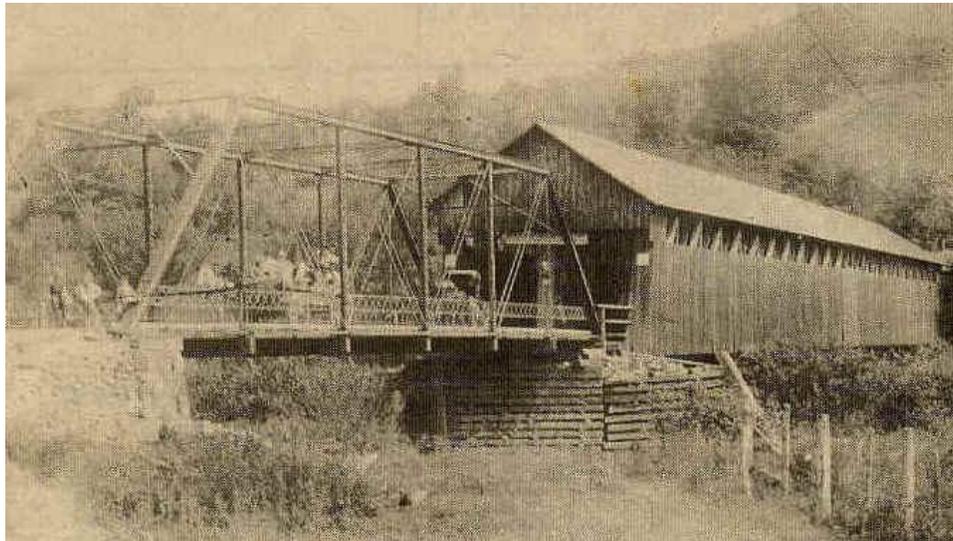
In the spring of 1869, an especially severe freshet washed out a wide channel across the western approach, necessitating the erection of a small wooden extension across the gap. Three extensions were erected to span the gap caused by a severe freshet, the first two of wood, in 1869 and 1887, and the last one of iron, in 1895.



In 1871, the bridge was sold to Moses Hubert of Blenheim for \$2,000. The State granted him a charter which ran for 20 years. A herd of cattle crashed through the extension span in 1887, and Oct. 29<sup>th</sup> of that year, a resolution was passed by the Town Board to build another approach, using whatever old material that could be salvaged, the cost not to exceed \$250.

In 1891, at the expiration of Mr. Hubert's charter, the bridge came under the jurisdiction of the State as part of the State's highway system. Soon afterward, the second extension crashed with a threshing machine. After many meetings and much discussion by the Town Board, it was finally decided on October 9, 1894, that if a new bridge extension was to be built, it should be of iron or steel or both. In 1895, the iron structure was paid for \$2,200.

In 1930, the peaceful years were shattered, when “Blenheim Bridge, Built 75 Years Ago, Faces Destruction” became the headline in many a local paper. Although Mr. Powers’ ancient wooden structure was nearly as strong as when it was built, still carrying heavy loads without yielding, the iron span adjoining it had cracked beneath a heavy load of ice. The bridge was to be abandoned the following summer, and a new concrete and steel bridge would span Schoharie Creek some hundred feet away from the wooden bridge. But on July 8, 1931, the Schoharie County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to retain the bridge as a public historical relic. For their determination to preserve the Old Covered Bridge, much credit was given to : Frank S. Neville who was, in 1931, Chairman of the Schoharie County Board of Supervisors; the members of the Highway Committee together with Lawyer J. Wright, who was County Superintendent of Highways; and Everett L. Mattice, then Supervisor of the Town of Blenheim. The county became custodian, and the bridge was “saved!” In 1932, the modern steel bridge replaced the wooded one, and the iron extension was torn down.



In 1935, a monument at the southern end of the new steel bridge and a marker distinguished the site. The monument reads:

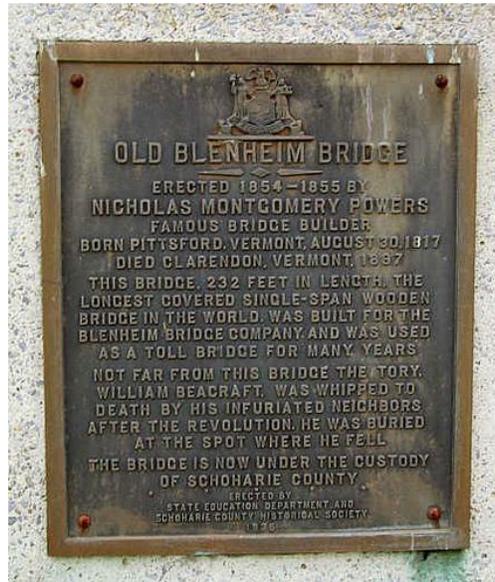
“Old Blenheim Bridge erected 1854-55 by Nicholas Montgomery Powers, famous bridge builder, born Pittsford, Vermont, August 30, 1817, died Clarendon, Vermont, 1897.

This bridge, 232 feet in length, the longest covered single-span wooden bridge in the world, was built for the Blenheim Bridge Company and was used as a toll bridge for many years.

Not far from this bridge the Tory, William Beacraft, was whipped to death by his infuriated neighbors after the Revolution. He was buried at the spot where he fell.

The bridge is now under the custody of Schoharie County.

Erected by State Education Department and Schoharie County Historical Society 1935.”



The New York State marker at the northern end of the steel bridge reads:

“BLENHEIM BRIDGE – Longest single span wooden bridge in world. Built by Blenheim Bridge Company, incorporated 1828. Last of its kind in this region. State Education Department 1935.”



In 1953, it again faced possible destruction. A good deal of money was needed to repair it. Should public funds be used? But the bridge was “saved” again, when, in the spring of 1954, the

County expended \$5,000 on the eastern abutment and portal, replacing most of the original stone with concrete and deepening the creek bed.

The picturesque old bridge has had many adventures. Once it was struck by lightning, but didn't burn. It has been afire three times, and is now insured like any ordinary house. Twice the roof caught fire from windblown sparks and embers from burning buildings in the village. Once a traveling "tinker" went to sleep in the bridge and tipped over the small charcoal stove he carried with him to heat the soldering irons used in mending pots and pans. A story that still persists probably has some truth: It seems that workers had to hide a jug of liquid refreshment quickly one day during the construction of the bridge, so they stuck it into a niche in the unfinished abutment they were working on; because they dared not stop working, they had to fill the remainder of the abutment and so far as is known, the jug is still there – vintage of 1855! Still attached is the sign proclaiming: "\$5.00 Fine to Ride or Drive This Bridge Faster Than A Walk." The original shingle roof is now completely replaced with galvanized steel roofing.

This year, (in 1955) the bridge is again "news"! It is celebrating its 100<sup>th</sup> birthday and the townpeople and historically-minded folk from miles around are seeing that it doesn't go by unobserved. Spearheaded by Helen P. Bliss, with the help of Fanchon D. Cornell, the enthusiastic crowd of August 20<sup>th</sup> was estimated at 800, and the temperature reached 110 degrees! It is, indeed a privilege to have in our midst the longest known single span covered wooden bridge in the world, the only one of its type (single center arch), and one of eight remaining "double-tunnel" bridges to exist in the United States.

Acknowledgement: Mr. Richard S. Allen, Round Lake, N.Y.

Some of the gatekeepers at the old bridge were George Fink, Edmond Shaffer, Freegift Patchin.

In the winter, snow had to be drawn on the bridge floor for the horses and sleighs.

In the fall of 1956, lightening rods were installed.

After having been designated a National Historic Landmark in 1964, a second celebration and parade transpired on July 10, 1965 when the bridge reached its 110<sup>th</sup> milestone. Helen Bliss and Fanchon Cornell were again in charge of the program, when a condensed bridge history was printed.

It was at this second bridge celebration that the bronze plaque mounted on a pink granite shaft, from the U.S. Department of the Interior National Park Service, was dedicated and unveiled in the presence of 500 people, including such dignitaries as governmental, historical, and bridge society representatives, as well as movie/television personality John McGiver of West Fulton. Also present were seven direct descendants of Nicholas Montgomery Powers. Included among

them was Charles F. Powers of Clarendon, Vermont, his only living grandson, whose signature appears among many other attendants present. (Charles had attended the Centennial Celebration ten years earlier.) The six others included three great-grandsons, two great-granddaughters, and one great-great-grandson, Alf Russell Strom-Olsen, also of Clarendon, Vermont. Charles E. Hilicus of Schenectady, a grandnephew of Roger Weidman, who helped build the bridge, was also present.



During the dedication ceremony, a telegram was read from First Lady Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson, who congratulated the Blenheim people on their celebration and said, “How proud you must feel to know that your own cherished beauty spot is now recognized by all Americans as part of our nation’s heritage.”

The bronze plaque reads:

OLD BLENHEIM BRIDGE  
has been designated a  
REGISTERED NATIONAL  
HISTORIC LANDMARK  
under the provisions of the  
Historic Sites Act of August 21, 1935  
This site possesses exceptional value  
in commemorating and illustrating  
the history of the United States  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
National Park Service  
1964



The Blenheim Bridge was one of 48 national historic landmarks and one of seven in the New York area thus designated by U.S. Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall, January 29, 1964. It was one of a total of 452 designated at that time since the category was established in 1935. Secretary Udall called the bridge “a magnificent example of the lost American art of building wooden covered bridges.” (See the “Schoharie County Historical Review” Fall-Winter 1965)



Throughout the years, several offers have been made by private individuals to purchase the bridge. The most recent offer (as of 1991) was made in 1970 by Binghamton attorney Franklin B. Resseguie, who was establishing a historical exhibit on Hiawatha Island, near Owego, New York at the time. He noted that, as a result of his acquisition of the bridge, it would be seen by thousands more people than at its present location. The Schoharie County Board of Supervisors turned the offer down.

In the spring of 1973, rotting timbers due to dirt and moisture made it necessary to call in Milton S. Graton from Ashland, New Hampshire, the world's only authentic covered bridge builder, who called himself a "Bridge Doctor." While Mr. Graton was working on the bridge, Norman Morris, a producer for CBS of the program "Exploring America with Charles Kuralt," came to the Schoharie County hamlet of Blenheim. Mr. Morris recorded a considerable amount of the history of the bridge, and interviewed Mr. Graton, who was staying at the old Chapman Hotel run by Blanche, Amos and Mildred King. Interestingly, Mr. Graton was rooming in the same hotel as the original bridge builder, Nicholas Powers, who had stayed there in 1855. As the bridge repairs continued at least through 1976, some of the old siding removed was used by local residents for the purpose of memorabilical framing.



In 1974, an impressive model of the bridge was mounted and encased in a plastic display case (given by the Harva Company of Schoharie). It was then placed in the conference room of the State Committee on Insurance in the new Albany Legislative Office Building as Schoharie County's contribution to the theme, "The Empire State – Peaks of a People's Experience." Avery L. Wilson of Delanson, a former Blenheim youth, had spent more than 2,000 hours in the 1940's building this scale model of approximately five feet. One side is open to show fully the rafters and trusses, while the other side shows the exterior appearance with roof and siding.

A second bridge model, scaled to one-half inch per foot (therefore approximately ten and one-half feet long), was taken to Cobleskill by the L.B. Cornells for the country's Bicentennial observance in 1976. In 1969, they had taken it to Colonie Center as part of the Schoharie County Maple Festival exhibit. Lyndon and Fanchon Cornell had built the model in 1955 for the bridge's Centennial Celebration. It has been in several parades throughout the county commemorating town, county, state and national events.

On August 2, 1980 the bridge's 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary was celebrated with possibly the largest crowd the village itself had ever seen – an estimated 3,000 persons. Organized by Town Historian Josephine Fuller and her assistant, Madeline Hitchcock, with the help of many others, it was an extravaganza never to be forgotten with its variety of entertainment and day-long activities (see “Schoharie County Historical Review.” Fall-Winter 1980)

On June 9, 1984, 125 persons gathered at the bridge, following a luncheon at Wesley Hall, when the bridge was designated a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark by the American Society of Civil Engineers with a plaque and monument.

The bridge's charming setting captures the imagination of historians and architects, artists and poets, lovers of a more simple time. For several years, a printed history was made available to the public, upon request. The Blenheim Bridge has been depicted on the covers of several covered bridge society pamphlets, as well as on greeting cards (including picture Christmas cards), post cards, and stationary across the country. It was also featured in a lower village painting by Helen Federico of Pound Ridge, NY. In 1959, Ms. Federico's painting served as the cover of the spring issue of “The Lamp,” published by the Standard Oil Company. In 1965, the bridge appeared in a Niagara Mohawk pamphlet and, in 1972, it was featured in a colored advertisement for Chevrolet Sparta School Buses. In 1991, prints of the bridge were put on small boards and pedestals, which were placed at each table setting of a special anniversary dinner celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the New York State Covered Bridge Society. Lapel pins bearing a logo of the covered bridge were also given to each attendant.



Each year, it seems, travelers come in greater abundance to visit the longest known single span covered wooden bridge in the world, the only one of its type (single center arch) and, in 1974, one of eight remaining “double-tunnel” bridges to exist in the United States. Reunions, weddings, and various other types of social gatherings have been held beneath its shadow for more than a century, linking the past with the present. May it always remain standing, a

reminder that civilization is to “Remove not the ancient landmark which thy fathers have set” (Proverbs 22:28).

January 1996 heralded another weather phenomenon which caused much damage to the siding of the bridge. FEMA funding was used to do the repairs.



The historic covered bridge stood proudly over the Schoharie Creek for more than 150 years and was a local treasure which helped put the tiny hamlet of Blenheim on the map until it was destroyed and washed down stream in the raging flood waters brought by Hurricane Irene on August 28, 2011.





Since that day, Blenheim and area residents and visitors have taken efforts to re-build this iconic structure. Starting with recovery of the bridge pieces, many volunteers spent weeks walking the Schoharie Stream identifying and collecting parts of the bridge. Many of the large pieces were marked and using GPS coordinates, were later collected by local farmers, contractors, and the county using large equipment. There was initially 59 locations that pieces had been spotted and many of the beams are in the center island just north of the bridge location. A 100 by 25 foot spot off of Route 30 is being readied to store the recovered bridge pieces.

These many pieces are being stored in Blenheim with hopes of re-incorporating some of these original timbers and hardware into the new Blenheim Bridge.





February 16, 2012, the Schoharie County Board of Supervisors passed a Resolution requesting a stay of de-designation of the Blenheim Bridge from the Department of the Interior, National Park Service. March 8, 2012, they received a reply from the U.S. Department of the Interior acknowledging the designation decision had been postponed indefinitely.

Schoharie County, after receiving a September 18, 2012 FEMA letter of denial of eligibility for replacement of the Blenheim Covered Bridge, filed an appeal. September 28, 2012, the County of Schoharie filed an appeal with NYSOEM (FEMA) requesting re-consideration on their decision.

June 21, 2013, Schoharie County is notified that FEMA has reversed their original determination and considered the Bridge appeal partially approved, providing limited federal funds to replace the facility back to the pre-disaster function and capacity of its alternate use. While this is a step in a positive direction, much work still needs to be done by the County in getting a project and funding approved.

With support from Congressman Chris Gibson, Assemblyman Peter Lopez, Senator Seward and Senator Gillibrand, it is hopeful that the Old Blenheim Bridge may once again span the Schoharie Creek.

On August 16, 2013, a plea was made to the Schoharie Board of Supervisors to support efforts to have the Blenheim Bridge project result in a re-built Blenheim Covered Bridge rather than any alternate projects. The Board of Supervisors voted unanimously in agreement and also directed the Recovery Coordinator to include the Blenheim Supervisor Robert Mann and Blenheim Long

Term Community Recovery Chairman Don Airey in ongoing activities related to the Blenheim Covered Bridge.

The new bridge will not only be a centerpiece for Blenheim, but a centerpiece for the economic recovery of Blenheim and Schoharie County.

The restoration of the bridge is part of the plan for the bridge park recreation area which would also include the old schoolhouse museum, a bike path, walking path and river walk – using the Blenheim Bridge as its centerpiece.

Funds are being raised through the sale of T-shirts and note cards.

