



Story and photos by Phil Jordan

VERMONT HERITAGE

Bridging History in Williamsville

Traditional replacement for a bridge too far gone



Williamsville's original bridge (above) served for more than one hundred years before being replaced, as Newfane selectman Gary Katz watched the final steps of the process.

IT'S AMAZING WHAT one encounters and experiences while traveling back roads and secondary highways in Vermont. The surprise when a turkey suddenly flies across your car's windshield. The adrenalin rush felt when a moose suddenly lumbers out of the woods and in front of your car, and you barely miss him. Oncoming traffic may include the occasional horse and rider, tractor, or ancient pickup truck. But nothing can top what motorists on the Dover Road in Williamsville, Vermont, encountered during the summer of 2010. Bright orange signs warned

motorists of a construction project and single lane ahead, but hardly prepared them for the sight of a covered bridge being built, albeit behind barricades, squarely in the highway. At this sight, almost any visitor to our state would have been tempted to say, "Only in Vermont!"

In the 1800s, this probably wouldn't have caused Great-grandpa to put down his buggy whip and reign in his horse, but it was enough in 2010 to cause some disbelief as passing motorists slowed to gawk at the spectacle, the replacement a-building for the Williamsville covered

bridge. For more than a century and a half it had withstood floods and weathered hurricanes and blizzards. Its aged timbers had borne the weight of countless wagons, sleighs, and cars, from Model Ts to Toyotas. It had seen the demise of the local general store and the Grange chapter, and had been within whistling distance of the long-gone West River Railroad. Slated for demolition and replacement, the old covered bridge was about to take its place in history as well. Williamsville is a small village; while not without its own post office, it's part of the larger town of Newfane.



The final stages of construction of the new covered bridge took place in the roadway near the job site, just prior to demolition of the old bridge and the salvage of its materials for recycling.

True, there is a town hall in Newfane (a former schoolhouse), but perhaps to keep matters neighborly, town meeting locations alternate between the Williamsville Hall (formerly the Grange) and Newfane's every other year. Gary Katz, chair of the Newfane select board, told me about the recent history of the Williamsville covered bridge. "It's been a troubled bridge, carrying more and more traffic than it was designed for. It was in serious enough condition even 25 years ago to require structural repairs; we installed...glue-laminated 2x12s the length of the bridge on both sides." More work was done in 1997, adding pine decking to bolster the floor.

"There had been a sign on the bridge that said 1870. It was plywood, so we of course knew that wasn't original!" Gary quips. Questioning the date paid off for him; perusal of the very first town report of March 1860 revealed that one D.B. Lamson was paid \$497.00 for building the bridge, and that L. Halladay received the princely

sum of \$101.64 for construction of the abutments. More important for Gary was how to deal with the bridge's appetite for repairs. Heavily worn planks and fasteners began to unravel under the wear and tear of traffic, most of which ignored the posted 5-mile-per-hour speed limit. "We were constantly doing something with the bridge's decking to avoid having people's tires punctured," recalls Gary. "There were two factions among the townspeople," he continues. "One that wanted to either repair or replicate the bridge, and one that wanted something modern, concrete, and two-lane." It came down to a vote in March 2000, and the vote was in favor of rebuilding the covered bridge, by a margin almost as thin as a dime.

Now, bridges aren't cheap to repair—or to rebuild—no matter what materials are used. Thanks to a heads-up from Roger Whitcomb, at the time a Vermont Department of Transportation engineer and later a project supervisor, the town was able to enroll the bridge

in the Vermont Agency of Transportation's Historic Covered Bridge Preservation Plan, established in 1998. A tidy \$1.6 million in federal funding was secured, with the town's voters reportedly approving \$48,000 in matching funds to rebuild and reinforce the bridge. But upon close inspection, the 1860 structure was deemed too heavily modified to reconstruct and too damaged to reinforce; the best option was to construct an exact replica, but with stronger materials. The bridge now was qualified for 100 percent federal and state funding. And, even better, Gary explains, "The day completed, it's designated an historic covered bridge." But first, what to do with the old bridge? In a strange twist, it was learned that when the Federal Highway Administration takes on such projects replacing a publicly owned historic bridge, they're first required to make the old bridge available for preservation. And so, the town of Newfane made television news when it became known that the Williamsville Covered

Bridge was being advertised in a newspaper as available and free, to whoever would remove it and save it. Despite this effort to abide by a federally mandated 30-day period, no takers appeared, and the bridge was slated for demolition.

“When work started in late summer of 2009,” adds Gary, “the deal was: work as much as possible before winter and without having to detour traffic two miles over dirt roads during the wintertime.” A homeowner with roadside property nearby allowed the use of land in which equipment and materials could be stored and the new bridge assembled by Alpine Construction, the firm handling the job. The neighboring woods soon echoed to the sound of red oak trunnels, or pegs, being pounded home into yellow southern pine latticework, much as they had when the original bridge builders plied their trade. “Today, they use southern pine for durability and strength, and because you can’t get spruce timbers in the dimensions that were used over a hundred years ago,” said Tom Lackey, State of Vermont project engineer. By June 2010, the new bridge stood, almost completed, cordoned off and protected by barricades in the roadway. On July 5, the Dover Road was closed on either side of the Rock River, and removal of the old bridge began. By month’s end, the old bridge was gone. Whatever timbers and memorabilia could be salvaged were on their way to new uses. The new bridge was also on the move—slowly, ponderously, on steel rollers traversing I-beams, being finally nudged ever so gently into place on the afternoon of August 5. What many called the newest covered bridge in the state of Vermont had taken its place in history. **F**

Just the facts

Visit the Vermont Agency of Transportation’s website, www.aot.state.vt.us for further information on Vermont’s Historic Covered Bridge Preservation Plan.



Williamsville

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