

OLD TOWN MUSEUM

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Established 1976

www.theoldtownmuseum.org

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The Old Town Museum is a volunteer effort dedicated to preserving Old Town's history.

A NOTE ON THE UPPER STILLWATER BRIDGES

Written by Eisso Atzema

Introduction:

If all goes to plan, work on the replacement of bridges #1472 and #2806 across the Stillwater River, better known collectively as the Stillwater Bridge, will start this summer. At that point, the two-part bridge will have served as a reliable connection between the two sides of the Stillwater River for 70 years---give or take a few months. Few will think of this bridge as iconic and even fewer will bemoan its replacement. This puts the overall visibility and popular appreciation of the bridge into stark contrast to that of the bridge it replaced those 70 years ago. In this note, I will discuss the history of the Stillwater bridge that came before the current bridge and how its replacement was so much more than just that.

The First Bridge:

As for so many projects at the time, the first plan to build a bridge across the Stillwater river at the current location involved the incorporation of a group called Proprietors of Upper Stillwater Bridge by an Act of Law passed by the Maine Legislature on February 19, 1835. The purpose of this corporation was to erect, repair, rebuild, and maintain a bridge above the Falls at Upper Stillwater Village. The founding members were the usual suspects from Upper Stillwater and Old Town Village for such enterprises and included (among many others) William Jameson (who owned most of the land in Upper Stillwater), Art Godfrey (then living on Bennoch Road, near what



is now the town line between Orono and Old Town---later on he became one of the first settlers of Minneapolis-St. Paul), Orimel Rogers (an Upper Stillwater resident after whom the University of Maine's Rogers Farm is named), and George Miller (who had the house in Upper Stillwater currently owned by yours truly built and then lost all his money in the 1840s). The Act specifies that a bridge "sufficiently high for the passage of rafts of timber, boards and other lumber with two sufficient sidewalks for foot passengers" (along with a few other specifications) is to be constructed within three years. In exchange for its efforts, the corporation was granted the right to charge tolls except for foot passengers and all those needing to cross the bridge for town meetings, attending church, or military service. Cattle was charged one cent per head, while sheep, swine or goats were charged four cents per dozen. The act does not mention two different parts to the bridge or the island between the two stretches. It is conceivable that the island was already connected to the Southern shore by means of a causeway or even that the current island is just the remnant of such a causeway. In fact, in the years just before the bridge was constructed, the Stillwater Canal Corporation (incorporated in 1828) had dug a canal on the west side of the river to allow surplus logs to bypass the saw mills just downstream from where the bridge now stands. It seems possible that the soil removed for that project was used to construct a dam that would form a pen to hold these surplus logs until they could pass through the channel.

Whatever may have been the case, it is known that a bridge was built in the location of the Northern stretch of the current bridge within months after the Act was passed.

Plans for the Coming Season

Planning for the summer program season is underway, and while nothing is set in stone yet, here are some of the presentations and events we are working on. Our opening program will revolve around the history of the Herbert Gray School and an official opening of the new display next to the new storage building on the museum lawn. A reunion of Herbert Gray students is part of the plan, so look for this event in early June if you attended the school as a child or taught there at any time. Other programs in the works include Genealogist/Author, Dana Murch discussing his research of his Franco American families, a history of the Old Town/Orono YMCA, a glimpse into oral interviews of local folks done by students at the University of Maine, a look at the history of Victory Field and a belated Maine bicentennial presentation. When we have more information about these upcoming programs we will share on our website and our facebook page. Hope to see you all this summer.

Stillwater Bridge concluded inside



However, due to a construction failure, it collapsed the same year and was completely rebuilt in 1836. Most likely, both these bridges were covered bridges---just like the predecessor of the current Orono bridge across the Stillwater River, the bridge connecting Old Town to Milford and the bridges near Gilman Falls across Pushaw Stream and Stillwater River all were covered. However, we do not have any description of the early bridge. At some point, a dwelling was constructed at the Southern end of the bridge on the upstream side of the bridge where the toll master and his family lived. It is clearly indicated on several 19th century maps of Old Town and it was still standing in 1924. The 1859 Walling map (see below) also shows a building opposite to the toll house that is marked "P.O." This usually refers to a post office, so perhaps the toll master at the time also was the local post master.

Presumably, tolls were paid in cash at each passing. However, for frequent passengers there was an EasyPass option as well. Indeed, the Old Town Museum owns several receipts for payment towards specific use of the bridge over an extended period of time.

The toll arrangement seems to have worked to everybody's satisfaction until the late 1860s when the bridge ap-

pears to be in a state of disrepair and the Corporation asks for a toll increase. As a result, the town of Old Town bought the bridge in 1870, took care of the delayed maintenance and made the road across the river a town road. From then on, the bridge could be crossed for free by everybody.

At this point, there still is no mention of a Southern bridge. This would only change in 1901, when the Old Town Enterprise reports on the collapse of the "short" bridge at Upper Stillwater as a result of a freshet. No word, however, on what replaced the short bridge.

Replacing the Bridge:

Meanwhile, covered bridges were increasingly losing favor. They were hard to maintain and many were not designed to bear the load of traffic that was not only getting more frequent, but also heavier. Concrete or steel bridges were increasingly viewed as a more modern and viable alternative. In the case of the Orono covered bridge, there were increasing concerns about the safety of the streetcars that had been passing across the bridge since 1896 and in the late 1910s, the wooden bridge was replaced with a design in concrete. In 1919, the Gillman Falls bridge across the Stillwater River was replaced with a more modern design as well. Sometime during the 1920s, the Milford bridge was replaced with a steel bridge.

Probably partly because the Stillwater Bridge was not see-



ing a lot of traffic, it held out much longer. By the 1940s, it was the only double-barreled covered bridge in Maine and local residents began to take notice--increasingly viewing the slow slide into irrelevance of the bridge as a metaphor for the old world giving way to a completely new one. It was not a coincidence that in 1944 the Stillwater author Jamie Michaels (1864-1959) wrote a poem called "In Memoriam (Stillwater Bridge)" in which she not only memorialized the bridge, but also embedded it firmly in the then prevailing heroic narrative of the Civil War with possibly a wink to the conflict the United States was involved in at that point. Just like the old canal along the Stillwater River (not used since the 1870s and mostly filled in by 1944) to which she dedicated a poem as well, the dilapidated bridge was a perfect symbol for a way of life that probably never was, but certainly would never come back again.

Driving Michael's point home in a rather prosaic way, the newspaper's introduction to her poem has it that

"Now seems the opportune time if ever there are to be lines regarding this ancient structure; for during the past few months vandals have loosened and picked out many of the boards forming the east wall and pried loose three of the long heavy timbers separating the walk for pedestrians from the road for vehicles. These timbers have either been carried away or thrown into the river."

Clearly, the bridge was in dire need of replacement. Because of the war effort and its immediate aftermath, it would take another six years before any decision was made, but by January 1950 there is consensus in the City Council that money needed to be found for the City's share in both the replacement of the Stillwater Bridge and the construction of a new High School building. I did not find any further discussion of any replacement plans in 1950, but by 1951 funds seems to have been allocated for the replacement of the bridge (and the construction of the new school).

In March that same year, there is some concern that the steel girders for the bridge might not be delivered by November 1, which presumably would affect the timeline of the project. By September, and again in October, however, the Penobscot Times reports that a temporary bridge has been put in place and that the old bridge is being removed (see photo below).

Note that the Times was careful not to say that the bridge was being demolished. In fact, it clearly was hard for many people to let go of the bridge and there were hopes that perhaps some other community was willing to take the bridge and give it a new lease on life. In the end, it is not clear what actually happened to the remains of the bridge, but it seems unlikely that this vague plan ever came to fruition.

As it so happened, the steel girders were not delivered until January 1952, which may have delayed the construction of the bridge (estimated to take three months) by a little bit.

In July 1952, the Penobscot Times reported that the bridge was ready to be opened later that month, with a nice photo of the new bridge in its final stages of completion. As far as I know, this low-quality picture is the closest thing that the Museum has to a photo of the bridge as it looked like in the 1950s.

Ultimately, the opening ceremony took place on Tuesday, July 22. Activities included a speech by John C. Cousins, president of Old Town's City Council, a short parade from Excelsior Hall (across the street from where Riverside Pizza is now) across the bridge to College Avenue (featuring a ride for the City's oldest residents--including Michaels, then 88), and a fly-over by three jet planes from Dow Air Force Base in Bangor. About 2000 people attended. The organizing committee included one Richard Hill, then a youngish engineer who had moved to Orono six years prior. In conjunction with the opening of the bridge, the Stillwater Parent Teacher Club had produced a short history of Stillwater Village. The Omega Club had also commissioned a special dinner plate that featured a drawing of the old bridge by Stillwater resident Kay Hawley with proceeds to go to the Club's High School Building Fund (see left). Both the booklet and the plate were on sale at the ceremony and could also be obtained at Laliberté's store and at Dick Hill's residence. As the Penobscot Times put it two days after the ceremony, a sturdy, modern structure now served the residents in place of the sagging old covered bridge.

In Conclusion:

As the Penobscot Times also noted, there was "sadness" at the opening ceremony as well. For the Times, that sadness was mostly about the disappearance of a landmark that had stood since 1836. As I suggested earlier, however, the demise of the covered bridge also signaled the end of an era. The streetcar had already made its last run on March 29, 1941. In spite of a temporary boom, the upheaval of war had definitely made an impact on the community as well. 1952 was also the year in which the Penobscot Chemical Fiber Company decided to discontinue its log drives on the Penobscot River. Indeed, with hindsight the post-war local economy was already showing many signs of systemic weaknesses. Soon the I-95 would obviate the need to pass through Old Town, very slowly sucking the life out of its downtown. Of course, there also was the new high school building that was under construction in July 1952 and would be completed in 1953. That same year, another landmark in Old Town, the Fransway Hotel and Apartments, would be destroyed by fire. A new era had begun indeed and there certainly was comfort in hanging on to the covered bridge and what it stood for. As shown above, the covered bridge was definitely considered iconic for Old Town and even after it had been replaced, its image lingered on. There probably is no other landmark in the Museum's collection that is so well represented through photos, drawings, paintings, and models. The Museum even owns original dowels and other parts taken from the bridge. Clearly, nostalgia had found something to which to latch on rather firmly.



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Greetings supporters and friends,

The Old Town Museum is anxiously looking forward to normal for our upcoming season. After two years of very few visitors due to Covid we are excited about returning to our normal schedule of three days a week. Let's hope things continue to improve with the virus.

Since purchasing the former St. Mary's Catholic Church in 1996 we have made a great number of improvements and repairs. A new roof, repairs to the belfry, moisture control in the basement, a new storage building, and much needed electrical upgrades. Much more needs to be done to keep the building in good shape. The 100th anniversary of the construction of the building is coming up soon. So it is understandable that things get tired at that age.

Two areas of concern to the Board of Directors are first, the need to do repairs to several cracks in the brick walls as well as pointing of the brick work on the north side of the building. And second, the condition of the stained glass windows. The brick work will be addressed this spring. With regard to the windows, we are attempting to gather information and suggestions on how best to repair, clean

and protect the windows. This will be an ongoing project and will no doubt involve great costs.

I hope you will enjoy this edition of our newsletter and will consider renewing your membership, or becoming a new member. As with any non-profit funding is always a concern. Donations of any size are greatly appreciated and will allow us to continue preserving the history of Old Town and the surrounding area. Thank you for your support.

Bill Osborne,
President, Board of Directors

Museum Seeking Military Items

The Museum is seeking donations of military items from WW2, Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf wars. If you or a family member have items you would like to donate we would appreciate them. We are looking for items from Old Town and area citizens. Medals, photos (with names) Awards, and any other items. We have a large collection of WW1 items, however we would be glad to increase it also. If you have items please call the Museum at 827-7245 and leave a short message with name and phone number.

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E-mail: _____

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Individual \$30	Senior \$20
Family \$50	Life \$400
Group or Business \$175	Donation: \$ _____

Membership entitles you to voting rights at the Annual Meeting.

The Old Town Museum is a 501(c)(3) organization.

If you are interested in volunteering at the Museum, please check here ☐

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