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COVERED BRIDGES

Man, Mother Nature and Father Time have claimed heavy toll on the depleted ranks of covered bridges. In some areas determined effort has managed to continue their existence. In other areas only the vagaries of geography and the changing paths of travel have combined to aid in their survival.

Though early America had no bridges at all- there were only stepping-stones for travelers afoot, placed at fording places-many people believe covered bridges, rather than the simple stringer type, are the oldest kind built in this country.

In 1797 Charles Wilson Peale, famous for his paintings of Washington, wrote an "Essay on Building wooden Bridges" in which he states, "It has been advised to cover bridges and some are being built in America." So the first covered bridge in America appeared around 1800 and credited with being the first was the bridge across the Delaware River at Easton, Pennsylvania; bearing on its portal, "T. Palmer, Bldr, 1805."

Many theories have been advanced as the reason bridges were covered. Some say it made it easier to drive animals-going to market-across a bridge since the entrance resembled that of a barn. This theory has merit, cattle were easily driven into the cool shade. Getting them out the other end was a different story. But, actually the reason for covering a bridge varied with the builder.

The most likely reason a bridge was covered was to let the timbered trusses and braces season properly. Too, the roof and sides strengthened the bridge and since bridges were often operated for toll, the bridge was more attractive, fetching a better price if the bridge keeper decided to sell. Prosperous millers often built covered bridges across the stream at the mill to accommodate their customers.

Whatever the reason for covering a bridge, no one can deny the precise engineering that was necessary for the construction. Trusses and beams were sometimes "laminated", but more often huge white oak or yellow poplar trees were felled at the site, the logs then hewn into the proper size and shape. The construction varied from the simple stringer type, single timbers with a shed built over them, to the complicated trusses, composed of triangles. In the triangled structure rigidity was insured since the polygon cannot be distorted without changing the length of a side. Much of the techniques used in building barns was adapted for the construction of covered bridges. The single kingpost, the queenpost, and the crossbraced Warren truss were all used. The spans of these earlier bridges were limited because the horizontal timbers had to reach from one bank or pier to the other.

To construct longer spans, bridge builders later designed new trusses that distributed the load and made it possible to use spliced timbers. The sturdy, Economical, and easily built Town lattice truss bridge, using spliced and short timbers was

one of the most popular methods of construction. The builders covered their bridges to increase their longevity by protecting the trusses and flooring against the destructive effects of weather. Ithiel Town claimed his bridge could be "built by the mile and cut off by the yard." Some designers including Burr and McCallum, introduced an element of horizontal thrust for added strength.

It has been said that all covered bridges look alike; such a generalization only holds true on a casual glance, for every bridge is different. They are different in truss design, in how the end braces are set, in the appearance of the portals and in their profile. ^{CERTAINLY} ~~Certainly~~ an open-lattice-truss design differs from the boarded bridge, and careful examination would indicate differences such as horizontal covering boards as compared to vertical covering. Many covered bridges have windows to look out from while others are completely closed; Some are short and squat, and others long and drawn out, and finally even similarly designed and signed bridges appear unique because of their location, for each presented a different engineering problem to the builder and a different scene to the viewer.

It is claimed that in the early days specifications for a new covered bridge called for it to be high and wide enough for a wagon load of hay to pass through. Such structures were almost always one-way bridges, which created the necessity for several customs. The first team of horses on the bridge was given the right-of-way or what was termed "The Courtesy of the Bridge." It was traditional that a person would stop and look before entering the bridge to determine whether or not it was clear.

The nearly nine hundred covered bridges that still stand in the United States span more than waterways--They are bridges to the past- Reminders of a simpler time. In most cases they were made of pre-cut timber, painted red and white (common color of the day) and posted inside with advertisements for anything from ladies fashions to horse salves.

Although the bridges vary widely, there are common designs, named for prominent bridge builders that help classify the bridges. These names includes Theodore Burr, Ithiel Town, and ~~Colonel~~ Stephan H. Long, who each promoted a particular truss construction utilizing only wooden components. William Howe is also a common name in bridge identification because he is the mill wright who in 1838 replaced wooden posts with adjustable iron rods.

Joseph ~~Con~~will, a covered bridge enthusiast who has visited every authentic covered bridge in the United States, says that authentic bridges are those whose trusses support the floor, as opposed to self-supporting bridges that have decorative sheds built on top of them. All authentic covered bridges were covered for the same reason- as previously noted- to protect the supporting timbers. Construction dates coupled with a knowledge of the materials and technology available in an area also help determine authenticity. Conwill warns that dates alone are not conclusive evidence; although covered bridges were largely a nineteenth-century phenomenon in the eastern United States, he knows of authentic twentieth century century bridges in the Pacific Northwest and Canada.

Pennsylvania today has the largest number of covered bridges still standing. In addition to having also had the

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first American covered bridge, built by Massachusetts born Timothy Palmer in 1805 - a Three-span, 550 foot structure across the Delaware River. Pennsylvania lays claim to an even greater feat in the second covered bridge because it was more than a thousand feet long, with five arched spans that crossed the Delaware River. This bridge was built by Theodore Burr, from Connecticut, and was the first to connect two states. Another Connecticut Yankee, Johnathan Walcott, completed the grand-daddy of all the world's covered bridges in 1813 with his mile-long Susquehanna River crossing at Columbia, Pennsylvania. This bridge was actually 5,690 feet long, with 28 spans.

Our neighboring state to the north, Ohio, with less than 200 covered bridges remaining out of a conservative estimate of 2000- ranks second behind Pennsylvania in existing bridges.

One of the most famous and unusual covered bridges was the old "Y" Bridge spanning both the Muskingum and Licking rivers at Zanesville, Ohio. This bridge was constructed from a point opposite Zanesville's Main Street to an Island at the mouth of the Licking, hence North and South each way across the mouth of Licking Creek. Though at first this description seems strange the geography was such that the bridge when finished effectively spanned both streams. Although this old bridge has long been gone from the scene its concrete successor today is known as the only "Y" bridge in the United States.

It is interesting to note that the cost of these covered bridges was most modest by today's cost standards- a 440 foot bridge at Conesville, Ohio was built in 1877 at a total cost of \$7,110.45. A well known Ohio bridge builder, Pacific Bridge Company, of Toledo had a standard charge for complete

100 feet---\$16.00 per foot
125 feet---\$18.00 per foot
150 feet---\$20.00 per foot
200 feet---\$24.00 per foot

Closer to home Kentucky has thirteen existing covered bridges. Curiously all are located in the Eastern portion of the State. The most western being the Beech Fork Bridge on the Washington-Nelson county line. The early 1800's saw a bridge building boom in Kentucky, with the concentration in the Eastern part of the state. One of the early builders and architect's was a German born builder named Levi Wernway. He built several for the Maysville Pike (Toll Road) company- This road extended from the Ohio River Southwest across the Licking River Valleys into the central Bluegrass. Many of the Early covered bridges were destroyed during the Civil War-Confederate General John Hunt Morgan became famous for his daring forays against enemy lines of transport and communication. A compilation of covered bridges which his men put to the torch would fill a lengthy page in the annals of the war.

The close of hostilities saw a new era of covered bridge-building in Kentucky. The war ravaged bridges were replaced and new ones erected, sometimes at a spot where only a ferry had served before. Big new bridges, of the later developed Howe Truss type, were built to span the Licking at places like Sherburna, Myers, Claysville, Falmouth and Butler.

This last bridge, the longest known covered bridge ever built in Kentucky, carried U.S. Route 27 across the Licking river on three spans with a total clear length of 456 feet. Built in 1870-71, at a total cost of \$18,450, it was damaged by the March flood of 1937 and replaced in September, 1937.

A compilation of covered bridges showed 65 still standing just before World War II, but in 1952 this number had shrunk to 39- until today when only 13 survive.

The last covered bridge to stand in Christian County was on the Canton Pike across the South Fork of Little River. It was replaced by an iron structure in the mid 1930's. Other covered bridges that I remember were located on the Layfayette Road, the Huffman's Mill Road, and at Binn's Mill at Peedee.

A rundown of the 13 remaining covered bridges in Kentucky shows that 6 are still open to traffic while the remaining 7 are closed.

The last bridge in Bourbon county is on the Colville Road just off of U.S. 68 across Hinkston Creek constructed in 1877 it consists of one 124 foot span and has a posted weight limit of six tons and is ~~possibly~~ open to traffic.

Bracken County boasts a bridge, now closed to traffic, known as the Walcott Bridge. It is a 74 foot span. It is a combination of the King Post and unusual Queen Post style truss bridge.

Fleming County boasts three covered bridge structures, the one open to traffic is the Goddard Bridge over Sandlick Creek. It is thought to be the oldest covered bridge still standing in Kentucky. It is of the Town-Lattice type of construction and consists of one 60 foot span and four seven foot six inch timber beam spans. Hillsboro Bridge, also in Fleming county spans Fox Creek. It was built in 1870 and is of the Burr Truss design. This structure consists of one 86 foot single span with a 14 foot width- this bridge is closed to traffic. The other bridge in Fleming County is known as Ringo's Mill Covered Bridge. Built in 1869-1870, it consists of one 81 foot span and is similiar in design to the Hillsboro bridge- It is also closed to traffic.

Franklin County boasts one, the Switzer Covered Bridge on Kentucky 1262 over North Elkhorn Creek. Constructed around 1874 it is 120 feet long and 11½ feet wide- It is also closed to traffic.

Greenup County is the only county that can boast two bridges still open to traffic. The Bennetts Mill Bridge across the Tygart River just off Ky 1215 was built in 1855 and is approximately 100 feet in length. Greenup County's other bridge known as the Oldtown or Little Sandy crosses the Little Sandy River. It is also about 100 feet in length.

Lawrence County has only one bridge known as Yatesville Covered Bridge, erected in 1879. It was in general use until 1965 when it was scheduled to be torn down. However, an appeal to Govenner Edward T. Breathitt saved the structure. It is a 130 foot single span, but is closed to traffic.

West of Vanceburg in Lewis County on Ky. 984 the Rectorville Bridge or Cabin Creek Bridge crosses Cabin Creek. This bridge is approximately 75 feet in length, in excellent repair and still in use.

According to some historians the oldest covered bridge in Kentucky, 1835, spans Lee's Creek near Dover in Mason County. It is a short bridge less than 56 feet long but is still open to traffic.

The Johnson Creek Bridge located in Robertson County just north of Blue Licks Battlefield State Park has been by passed by a new concrete span. It is located just off Ky. 165.

The 13th existing bridge is located in Washington County and is known as the Beech Fork Covered Bridge. This bridge consists of two 100 foot spans and is closed to traffic.

If anyone has the nostalgic yen to view a covered bridge the closest one to us is located at Port Royal near Clarksville. This bridge, built in 1903, stands on three tall stone piers, high above the Red River. It is of Howe-Truss construction and was built by J.C. McMillan.

Covered bridges once stood in 42 of the 50 states. In the south only Florida and Louisiana have never had them.

Anderson M. Scruggs wrote a poem entitled:

The Covered Bridge

Some part of life becomes oblivion;
Something with roots deep buried in the heart
Of simple folk is lost, as one by one,
These pioneers of other days depart.
Only the country folk, whose careless tread
Endears a dusty road, can ever know
The peaceful, clattering joy of rude planks spread
Above drowsy creeks that gleam below.
Here was a refuge from the sudden showers
That swept like loving music field and wood,
And here cool, tunneled dark when sultry hours
Danced with white feet beyond the bridge's hood...
Yet there are soulless men whose hand and brain
Tear down what time will never give again.