

Bridge to the past, bridge to the future

THE STORY OF THE JAY BRIDGES

LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, August 20, 2004



The history of the Jay bridge is an inextricable part of the history of this hamlet; you can't tell the story of Jay without telling the story of the bridge. That may be why the prospect of building a new Jay bridge over the Au Sable River has generated so much controversy since the plans were first developed 21 years ago.

The project's last major hurdle was winning the Adirondack Park Agency's approval, a task that was completed last Friday, Aug. 13. With that final barrier surmounted, we thought it might be helpful to walk through the history of the Jay bridge one more time, from start to finish, as the community puts the controversy over the bridge's future behind it.

Nineteenth century Jay

The settlement of Jay started at the end of the 18th century when Nathaniel Mallory bought a 200-acre lot around the rocky falls on the east branch of the River Sable. Within a couple of years, Mallory and his brother William were operating a saw mill, a grist mill, a blacksmith shop, a tannery and a small forge on the south bank of the river, all drawing mechanical power from a dam built just above

the falls.

Mallory sold his riverside industrial complex in 1802 to John Purmort for the bargain price of \$5,000 in gold (just over \$65,000 in modern currency). Purmort and his family expanded these works, and with them the hamlet of Jay grew.

"Purmort continued the manufacture of iron as well as undertaking an extensive manufacturing and mercantile business," said the writers of a 1991 historical survey of Jay. "By 1853 the small hamlet of Jay had grown to include a store, clothing works, tannery, wheelwright shop, blacksmith shop, forge and 17 dwellings."

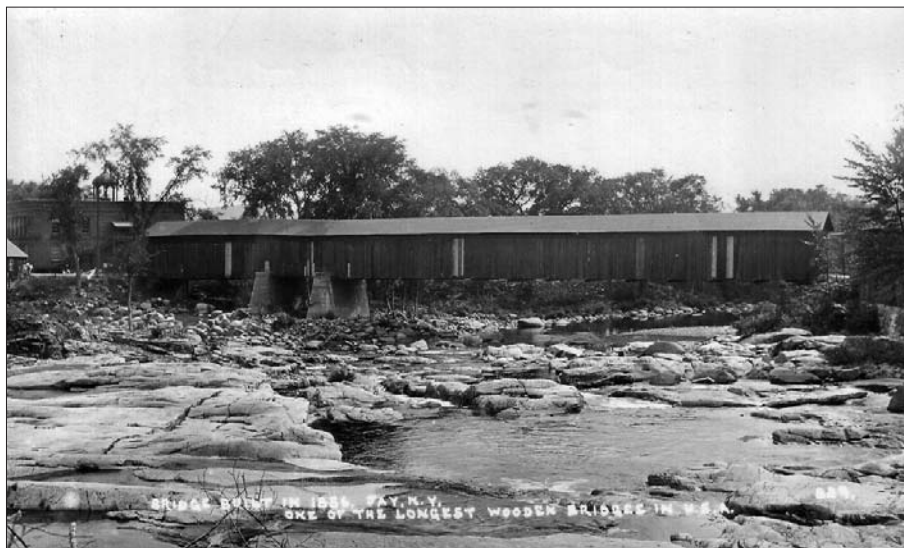
Around 1855, fire struck the building that housed the Purmort

iron forge. No sooner was it rebuilt — at significant expense — than an even greater disaster struck: the flood of Sept. 30, 1856. Heavy rains caused a dam at St. Huberts, above Keene Valley, to burst; the wall of water let loose took out every bridge on the Au Sable River between St. Huberts and Lake Champlain, except two in Keeseville.

Most of the covered bridge connecting the Purmort works to Jay hamlet was destroyed, as were most of the industrial buildings on the south bank. With finances already stretched thin after rebuilding the forge just a year or two earlier, the Purmorts could re-open only their store on the north bank and the grist mill on the south.

Work on a new covered bridge was started the spring after the flood. George M. Burt of Au Sable Forks was hired to build a 160-foot span, reconnecting the remaining 80-foot portion of the old bridge with the river's south bank. Most of the work was completed in 1857, though the exterior covering was not finished until the following year.

Eight years after the flood, in 1864, the J. & J. Rogers Iron





Company of Au Sable Forks bought out the Purmorts. Rogers installed a new, larger forge as well as a brick factory that supplied construction materials for other company buildings in the area, including a new, two-story company store. The handsome brick building, with its distinctive cupola, stood on the north bank until the 1950s.

Like most other Adirondack iron makers, Rogers pulled out of the business in the late 19th century. On July 24, 1890, the company closed down the Jay forge, which never re-opened.

By 1953 the Purmort dam was gone, and two nearby buildings west of the bridge — a grist mill and a carpenter’s shop later converted into a butter factory — had been razed. The forge east of the bridge was demolished in the early 1950s after the Rogers property was finally sold off. The last of the forge-complex buildings, a bright-red barn-like structure, served for several decades as the Jay Highway Department garage until it was demolished in 1990.

Today, all that’s left of Jay’s riverside industrial complex are four of the Rogers workers’ houses

— two on the north bank, two on the south — along with an early 19th century blacksmith shop, the monumental stone remains of containment walls and dam footings on both sides of the river ... and the Jay covered bridge.

Accidents shape the bridge

Little was recorded about the Jay covered bridge until 1941, when the first of a series of crucial accidents occurred. Those accidents may have been factors in driving the state to start planning in 1983 for a new bridge in Jay over the Au Sable River.

On Oct. 16, 1941, a Jay township gravel truck was driving across the covered bridge when it broke the center span and dropped through to the river below. A new floor was installed in the bridge then, using 23-foot-long 12-by-12-inch timbers. The repair job cost \$20,000 — more than \$250,000 in today’s inflated currency.

On Jan. 26, 1953, a truck loaded with 8 tons of lumber broke through the planking on the old, pre-1857 north end of the bridge. The 80 feet of bridge left over from before the 1856 flood was removed, replaced by an earth-filled concrete approach and abutment. Three steel-and-concrete piers were installed under the



“Gone But Not Forgotten, watercolor by Maurya Reid

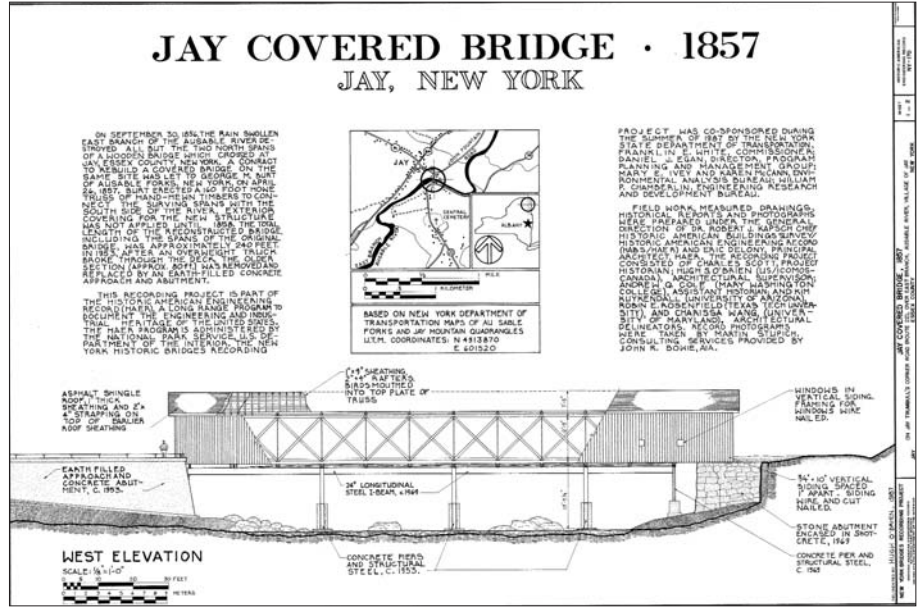
remaining span. The repair cost was, again, \$20,000 — or about \$135,000 today.

Further changes were made to the bridge in 1969, but not in response to an accident. A line of I-beams was run beneath the center of the bridge, and a fourth pier was built near the southern end to support the I-beam.

On Nov. 7, 1985, a loaded Pepsi truck lost its brakes coming down the Wilmington Road toward the Jay Green, careening down Mill Hill and ripping through the covered bridge. The truck tore out all the wooden cross beams and steel reinforcements on the upper portion of the bridge, leaving it crooked and close to collapse. The bridge was closed for a month while \$45,000 in repairs were made.

New bridge planned

Plans for a new bridge were already in the works by the time the Pepsi truck lost its brakes. The state Department of Transportation made its first project request for a



new bridge in November 1983. The following May, federal funding was approved and the DOT started designing the project. A draft design, completed in 1986, proposed a site for the new bridge 600 feet upstream from the covered bridge — just above the Jay swimming hole. A public information meeting on the plan was held in February 1986 in the Community Center in Au Sable Forks, but the project got sidelined when federal

funding was killed. Later in 1986, the Essex County Board of Supervisors came up with an alternative to a new bridge for Jay: Just maintain the covered bridge as part of a public park and new historic district. The design for this project, funded by two grants from the New York State Council on the Arts, was completed in 1987, and work on the year-long project was supposed to begin in July 1987.

It didn't.

When federal funding for the DOT's new-bridge project was restored in 1992, public opposition formed around a new group, Bridge and Beyond, led by Jay B&B owner Fred Balzac. Bridge and Beyond objected to placing a bridge so close to Jay's swimming hole, a major tourist draw for the hamlet.

Bridge and Beyond employed several tactics to communicate their message. Letters to the editors of local newspapers were written. Balzac penned articles on the Jay bridge for sympathetic newsletters and magazines.





“Before the first concrete pier is submerged in the Au Sable,” Balzac wrote for the New York State Covered Bridge Society Courier in March 1993, “isn’t it worth exploring whether a bridge that has served the transportation needs of the area for six generations can first be remade to handle them for six generations more?”

In 1993, Jay artist Joan Turbek came out with a children’s coloring book, “The Little River and the Big, Big Bridge,” distributed by North Country Books. Turbek’s story focussed on a little girl in an Adirondack riverside town whose swimming hole, near a charming wooden covered bridge, was being threatened by the prospect of a big new bridge.

The DOT started investigating the alternative of rehabilitating the covered bridge to accommodate truck loads, holding another public meeting at the Community Center on Dec. 13, 1994, to discuss all of Jay’s bridge options. That meeting did not, however, turn the tide in favor of a restored covered bridge.

On July 6, 1995, the Board of Supervisors took back its 1986 resolution in support of rehabilitating the wooden covered bridge. The following month, on Aug. 10, the Jay Town Board unanimously adopted a resolution supporting a new bridge to be built 600 feet upstream of the covered bridge.

Bridge and Beyond struck back with a petition campaign, mailed out in October 1995 just prior to

local elections. According to the group, 400 people responded to the “survey,” with 72 percent (288 people) opposing the new, upstream bridge proposal.

The main issue in the November 1995 local election was the Jay bridge. Voters overwhelmingly backed the re-election of town Supervisor Vernon McDonald (555), a supporter of the new bridge, against Barry L. Clark (244) and Bridge and Beyond’s Fred Balzac (207).

By the time another set of public meetings on the project were called for Feb. 5 and 6, 1997, two more site options had been floated by the DOT: one 1,400 feet upstream of the covered bridge, the other 2,400 feet upstream. In the

meantime, height restrictions on the covered bridge had been reduced to 8 feet, forcing lumber trucks, fire trucks and school buses wanting to cross from Jay to the Glen Road to go 5 miles north to the Stickney Bridge or 6 miles south to Upper Jay.

A Jan. 24, 1997, article in the Lake Placid News focused on the role of Jay Ward, Ward Lumber's president, in the matter. Ward had consistently supported building a new bridge rather than rehabilitating the old one. Critics said his only concern was making it quicker and cheaper for logging trucks to get to the Ward Lumber mill on Glen Road.

At the Feb. 5, 1997, public meeting, DOT officials ruled out

the rehabilitation of the covered bridge for motor vehicles, pointing out that after rehabilitation it would still have been a "substandard, one-lane bridge, but would have lost much of its historic value ... after the extensive renovation necessary to accommodate large trucks."

At the same meeting, officials ruled out building a new bridge 400 feet downstream of the covered-bridge site — the same location where final plans have placed Jay's new bridge — because of problems with building on a flood plain and the chance that a new bridge could be damaged if a flood ever washed the covered bridge away.

The covered bridge removed

In May 1997 came the Jay

bridge's D-day. Early in the month, a DOT engineer issued a report stating that the covered bridge could no longer sustain traffic. The bridge was closed on May 14. Even if the covered bridge were to be repaired, county officials said, it would only be able to carry vehicles weighing 3 tons or less — still not sufficient for lumber trucks, fire trucks or school buses.

The county Board of Supervisors decided in June to have the covered bridge lifted off its footings and stored on the riverbank for later restoration. Part of the board's decision was based on a memorandum of understanding signed that month between Essex County and the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic





Preservation concerning the preservation of the covered bridge.

In the meantime, with the covered bridge removed and no permanent replacement yet constructed, a temporary, one-lane bridge would be installed in the wooden bridge's place.

Bridge and Beyond accused county leaders and Jay Ward of orchestrating the covered bridge's closure to bring the matter to a head and force the decisions needed to get a new bridge built.

While the covered bridge waited for removal, anonymous persons painted "grafitti" on the structure. According to one source, the "grafitti" read "Save the Bridge."

The covered bridge was sawed into four sections to facilitate its

removal. On June 12, 1997, the last two sections of the bridge were lifted off the river. The temporary replacement bridge was installed and opened to traffic on July 3. A couple of weeks later, on July 15, another public information meeting was held on the project.

A DOT report released in September 1997 focused on two sites for a new Jay bridge: one 1,400 feet upstream of the former covered-bridge site, the other 400 feet downstream.

The upstream option, costing \$3.6 million, would involve 2,000 feet of new access road and \$210,000 in costs for buying rights of way from property owners.

The downstream option, pegged at \$4.6 million, would

require 3,379 feet of new access road, plus the rerouting of 1,450 feet of the North Jay Road to avoid potential flood damage, and about \$234,000 in rights-of-way costs.

In January 1998, Fred Balzac gave a personal endorsement to the downstream location, saying it would have less of a detrimental impact on the community than would the upstream option. He noted that approaches to the upstream location would necessitate a bridge standing 50 to 60 feet above the river and more than 400 feet long, making it more expensive for the county because it would require special maintenance equipment the county doesn't have.

On Aug. 27, 1998, the Jay covered bridge was placed on the state

register of historic places.

On Dec. 11, 1998, following an extensive study, the State Historic Preservation Office said that neither the upstream site nor the downstream site for a new bridge would negatively affect any of Jay's historical assets.

A March 23, 1999, public meeting gave residents a chance to share their views about the upstream and downstream options. Jay Ward said he was not satisfied with either of them, asking what had happened with the site 600 feet upstream. Ward was told that the 600-foot-upstream approach would run through a designated recreation area along the Au Sable River, making it ineligible for federal funding.

Town Board struggles

As the time drew closer when a siting position would have to be made, a public hearing was held on Nov. 9, 1999, at the Community Center in Au Sable Forks. "Both of these sites, nobody wants them," said Tom Douglas, who had won re-election one week earlier to a second term as town supervisor. "I'm deathly opposed to it, and I'm willing to fight." Town historian Mary Wallace, on the other hand, endorsed the downstream site.

One week later, on Nov. 16, 1999, Douglas suffered a heart attack, sidelining him while discussions of siting Jay's new bridge proceeded.

A Dec. 9, 1999, straw poll of Jay Town Board members inclined

toward supporting the downstream alternative. Only Councilman Tom P. O'Neill supported the upstream site.

In December 1999, county public-works chief Fred Buck clarified that the added cost for maintaining an upstream bridge would not be significant, despite earlier concerns he had expressed.

Several days before a special Dec. 27 meeting of the Jay Town Board, scheduled to endorse one of the sites for a new Jay bridge, lame-duck Councilman John Sheldrake said that he had changed his mind, based on Buck's remark and would support the upstream site.

When Dec. 27 came, the Town Board was deadlocked, with



O'Neill and Sheldrake voting in favor of the upstream site, councilmen Lee Torrance and Archie Depo against it. An attempt by Depo to defer action on site endorsement until Supervisor Douglas could get back to work was defeated, despite heartfelt pleas from son Randy Douglas and daughter Debbie Straight.

When the Jay Town Board took up the matter of site endorsement on Feb. 3, 2000, the councilors were still deadlocked, despite the rotation of two former councilmen off the board. O'Neill and new Councilman Gerry Hall voted for the location 1,400 feet upstream, while Depo and new Councilwoman Vickie Trombley

endorsed the site 400 feet downstream of the old covered bridge. A letter from Supervisor Douglas, still sidelined by his heart attack, indicated that he opposed both sites but would recommend the downstream location, citing lower maintenance costs and less visual impact.

On Feb. 7, 2000, the Essex County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution supporting the 400-foot-downstream site for Jay's new bridge.

On March 13, 2000, Supervisor Douglas died en route to the hospital after suffering a final, severe heart attack.

Federal funding for the Jay bridge project lapsed again in 2000,

but in 2001 the DOT began preparing a Final Environmental Impact Statement on both the upstream and downstream sites. When the FEIS and Final Design Report were released in February 2002, the site 400 feet downstream of the former covered-bridge site was chosen.

On Jan. 6, 2003, Essex County gave final approval for the design of the new bridge project.

In the face of opposition to the project from a local homeowner, the Jay Town Board passed a unanimous resolution on May 13, 2004, in support of the downstream site.

On Aug. 13, 2004, the APA voted unanimously to approve the DOT's project plans for Jay's new bridge.

Jay: The town of covered bridges

The primary tourist attraction in present-day Jay township is the mid-19th century covered bridge in Jay hamlet. Today it sits in an empty lot, in the latter stages of historic reconstruction.

Today's covered bridge replaced an earlier one that was washed away in September 1856, when the St. Huberts dam broke on the Au Sable River above Keene Valley. Construction was started on the "new" bridge in 1857, and work was finished in 1858.

The Jay covered bridge is the only one remaining in the Adirondack-Lake Champlain region, and before its removal was the largest covered bridge still in use in New York state.

But Jay township once had five covered bridges spanning all the key Au Sable River crossings.

Before 1879, both of the vehicular bridges then standing in Au Sable Forks — the Rolling Mill Hill bridge, and the Main Street bridge — were covered bridges.

The 1856 flash flood that wiped out the original bridge in Jay hamlet also destroyed the bridge between Rolling Mill Hill and the village of Au Sable Forks. A wooden covered bridge built to replace the earlier Rolling Mill Hill bridge was in turn replaced in 1879 by the 114-foot, single-span, iron bridge that crosses the river there today.

Au Sable Fork's Main Street crossing of the West Branch of the Au Sable River has been the site of many bridges. The south side of an early wooden covered bridge there burned in an 1864 fire, but another covered bridge took its place. In 1890 a steel arch bridge replaced

the last covered bridge. That 1890 bridge was replaced in turn by the bridge to be found there today, built in 1931-32.

The Stickney Bridge, which crosses the Au Sable between the Forks and Jay hamlet, used to be a covered bridge. The present structure was built in 1928.

A wooden covered bridge crossing the Au Sable at Upper Jay was built in 1855, just in time to be washed out by the 1856 flood. Another covered bridge was built to replace it, constructed by the same man who built the covered bridge in Jay. That bridge spanned the river in Upper Jay from 1857 until 1915, when a vote was taken to replace it with a steel bridge. The 1915 bridge was replaced again in 1960 with the structure that stands there today.