



# 'S.O.B.' means 'Save Our Bridges'

by LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, February 24, 2006

There are many who love the Adirondacks.

Some love the lonely Adirondack trails, the wild forests, the pristine lakes, the clear, flowing rivers and the high, alpine peaks.

Some love the Adirondack camps, great and small.

And some of us — some 130,000 of us — live full-time in one of the hundred towns and villages that lie within the Blue Line. We don't think of the Adirondacks as a park; for us, it's just *home*.

One organization documents, protects and preserves the structures of this vast, wild region for all those who love it: Adirondack Architectural Heritage. This 16-year-old nonprofit organization, based in Keeseville, has maintained a list since 1994 of "The Adirondack Park's Most Endangered Historic Places."

Over the next month or so, we're going to take a look at some of the historic Adirondack structures that have been highlighted on AARCH's Most Endangered

list. Some are endangered now; some were once endangered, but have been saved; others have been lost to demolition, disintegration or alteration.

**WE'LL START** with a look at some of the most basic kinds of endangered architectural structures in the Adirondacks: our bridges.

In some ways, the bridge is the archetype of architecture itself. As a structure, it is almost *all* structure — just framework and supports, arches and trusses and piers, occasionally adorned with a simple roof and walls, but mostly with no more dressing than a deck for carrying traffic across a void, either by foot, hoof or wheel.

Steven Engelhart, executive director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage, has been an expert on North Country bridges for some time now. In 1991, three years before taking the helm at AARCH, Engelhart wrote "Crossing the River: Historic Bridges of the Au Sable River," a

study of 19 spans in Keene, Wilmington, Jay, Au Sable Forks and Au Sable Chasm. In 1999, 13 of those bridges were named to the National Register of Historic Places.

Since then, one of those bridges has been lost, one exists only as a reproduction, and three more are currently endangered.

**THE 1856 COVERED** bridge in Jay hamlet is probably the best known of the 19 bridges in Engelhart's book.

In 1983, the state Department of Transportation began planning to build a new bridge in Jay to replace the aging, obsolete wooden bridge.

For much of the 20-plus years since then, the Jay Covered Bridge has been the focus of intense controversy.

Some have fought to keep the covered bridge, just as it is or with only minor alterations, seeing it as

**AT TOP**, the Walton Bridge, on the Hull's Falls Road in Keene.



a bridge to the region's past.

Some have argued for its complete replacement, saying that a span built for the horse-and-buggy age can't serve the needs of an era moved by automobile, school bus, fire engine and lumber truck.

In early 1997, the DOT closed the Jay Covered Bridge, calling it a safety hazard. That May, the old bridge was sawed in two and lifted onto the river's south bank to await restoration. In the meantime, a temporary steel bridge was put in its place.

A site 400 feet downstream was chosen for a new, two-lane bridge designed to carry the heaviest of modern vehicles. Construction of the new bridge

**TOP**, a pre-1953 postcard shows the Jay Covered Bridge, with the last surviving 80 feet of the pre-1856 bridge still attached on the north end.

**MIDDLE**, workmen started taking the old Jay bridge apart in December 2003.

**AT LEFT**, by August 2005, the framework of the reconstructed bridge was finished — but with only 20 percent of its material salvaged from the 1856 bridge, it was more an authentic reproduction than a restoration of the original structure.

was started in 2004; completion is expected late this summer.

**IN THE** meantime, starting in December 2003, the wooden Howe truss bridge, started in 1856 and finished in 1857 by George M. Burt of Au Sable Forks, was carefully taken apart by a contractor experienced in historic restoration work.

By August 2005, the deck and framework of a new covered bridge was finished. It had been rebuilt using the same methods, and according to the same design, employed to construct the original.

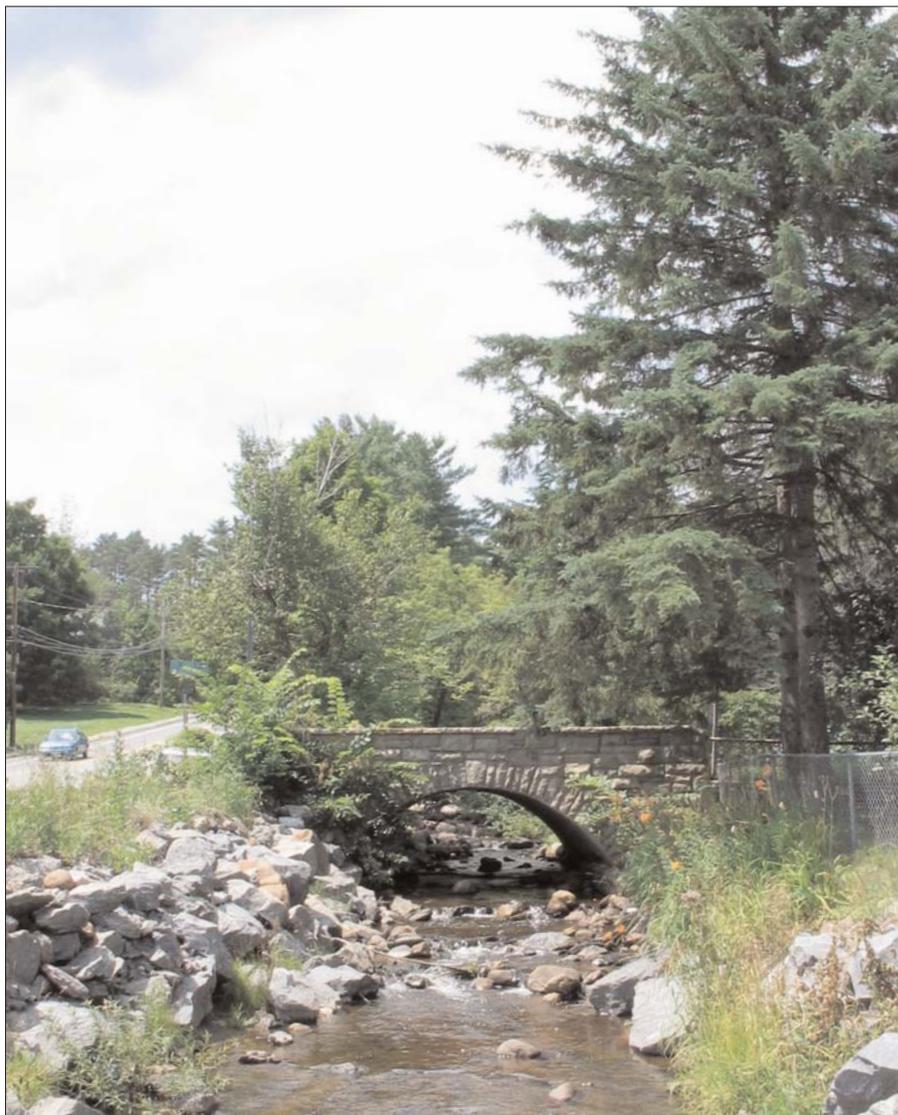
But the original, it was not.

Over the years, the materials George Burt had used to build the old covered bridge had weathered and decayed. Road salt had damaged some of the timbers; several truck accidents had necessitated the replacement of others. By the spring of 2004, only 20 percent of the old bridge was judged viable for use in the reconstruction project.

Later this year, during the 150th anniversary of the old covered bridge, engineers will slide the new covered bridge back into place across the river. Most preservationists would say that the bridge future generations will find there is a facsimile of the original, a reproduction — an authentic reproduction, to be sure, and very well executed, but a reproduction nonetheless.

The old Jay Covered Bridge is no more — but its faithful and durable memory survives.

**SIMILAR CIRCUMSTANCES** have befallen a tiny concrete arch bridge, faced in cut stone, that once carried Main Street traffic



The old Palmer Brook Bridge, built in the 1930s by the WPA, was demolished in 2003.

across Palmer Brook in Au Sable Forks on the way to the village golf course.

Built in 1938 by the Works Progress Administration, it was designed in such a way that the opening beneath it was not wide enough to accommodate the flow of water that pours down Palmer Brook during a 100-year flood.

In 2003, Black Brook township tore the old bridge out, replacing it with something just as attractive, in its own way, whose design and appearance allude to their historic predecessor.

Again, an old bridge is gone — but a rock-solid memory of it stands in its place.

**THREE MORE** of the Au Sable bridges named to the National Register in 1999, though endangered, still survive: the Old State Road Bridge, in Au Sable Chasm; the Upper Bridge, in Keeseville; and the Walton Bridge, in Keene.

All three have been closed by the state DOT: the Upper Bridge in 2005, the Old State Road Bridge in 2004, and the Walton Bridge sometime in the Nineties.

The Walton Bridge runs off the Hull's Falls Road, which follows the Au Sable River out of Keene Center to state Route 73 at Marcy Field. The Walton Bridge connects the Hull's Falls Road with Grist Mill Road (previously called the Doctor Ray Road), which runs downstream along the other side of the river.

Besides its picturesque setting on a lonely mountain road, the Walton Bridge is interesting because of its lenticular truss, a doubled arch shaped like a lens — hence, the name — supported at either end by posts. Though the structure's manufacturer, the Berlin Iron Bridge Company, made 600 to 700 lenticular truss bridges in the 1880s and 1890s, the Walton Bridge is one of only about 50 modern survivors of the type.

Originally spanning Black Brook in the Clinton County hamlet of the same name from 1890 to 1925, the Walton Bridge was purchased by Essex County to



The Walton Bridge, Keene, with its lenticular (lens-shaped) truss

replace an earlier bridge on the Hull's Falls Road site that had washed out in an autumn flood.

**THE OLD STATE** Road Bridge used to be the main bridge carrying traffic along U.S. Route 9 across the Au Sable River in the hamlet of Au Sable Chasm.

Constructed around 1890, it replaced a succession of wooden

bridges that had been built across the same spot, between Alice Falls (just upstream) and Rainbow Falls (just below). The moisture rising up from the two falls resulted in the rapid decay of those wooden bridges, a problem solved by the construction of the iron bridge.

“The Old State Road Bridge is historically significant,” Engelhart wrote in 1991, “as an intact and well-preserved example of late 19th century bridge engineering and construction.”

The bridge retains many of its original design features, including a walkway enclosed by a lattice railing that provided a celebrated view down the chasm.

**THE UPPER** Bridge, in Keeseville, is the latest of the National Register bridges to have been closed by the state.

Like most bridges over the Au Sable River, Keeseville's Upper Bridge is the most recent in a succession of spans crossing the river at the same location.

The original wooden bridge, built in the 1840s, consisted of four connected spans, their junc-



Bridging the Au Sable River between the Rainbow and Alice falls in the hamlet of Au Sable Chasm, this ca. 1890 iron bridge was closed in 2004 after a DOT inspection.

tions supported by piers anchored in cribs built on the riverbed. When the first bridge was swept away in the infamous flood of 1856, a second wooden bridge replaced it, this one a single-span very similar to the one built in Jay hamlet. The second bridge collapsed in 1875 under the weight of a three-foot snowfall accompanied by high winds.

A call for bids to construct a third Upper Bridge went out to bridge companies throughout the northeast. The winning proposal came from Murray, Dougal and

Co., which manufactured bridges for just a few years during the 1870s. Besides Keeseville's Upper Bridge, the only other Dougal-built bridge still standing today is a canal bridge in rural Bucks County, Pa., north of Philadelphia.

**ALL THREE** of the closed National Register bridges on the Au Sable River are under the control of the Essex County Department of Public Works, headed by Fred Buck.

"None of them are essential

river crossings," Engelhart acknowledged last week. "That makes them not really critical for county maintenance."

Engelhart did say, however, that he has spoken with Buck about the fate of the three bridges, and that those talks have been generally encouraging.

"Our conversations have been about how to bring the Old State Road and Upper bridges back on line," Engelhart said. "The Walton Road, on the other hand, really works well as a foot bridge — but it does require maintenance."



Keeseville's historic Upper Bridge, built in 1888, was closed last year by the state DOT following a routine inspection.