

BRIDGES of the TOWN OF RUSSIA

# BRIDGES Town of Russia

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By: Paula Johnson, Town Historian

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# BRIDGES

Bridges played a very important part in the development of the Town of Russia, Herkimer County, New York.

There were no bridges in the Town before 1790. Most of the early settlers in the Town lived on the high ground. Rivers were the obstacles to land communication for early settlers and a bit of high water would make a fording place useless in a few hours. Bridges just HAD to be built, and quickly, if the scattered settlements of the country were going to be held together. Log and plank bridges provided year round access and lasted seven to eight years.

In the 1820's there weren't any bridges across the West Canada Creek in the Poland area; the road ran along the East side of the river. According to an 1826 map of Herkimer County, there were bridges at Herkimer, Middleville, and Newport. There were also bridges at Trenton Falls and Prospect. By the late 1800's the Town had more bridges than any Town in Herkimer County.

One of the first in our area was the **SCHERMERHORN BRIDGE** built as a covered bridge in the early 1800's crossing the West Canada Creek upstream from Sunny Island to connect Poland to the farms on Schermerhorn Hill and in North Gage. It was replaced with a steel thru-truss bridge in 1929. In 1996 it was replaced with the present bridge, which is a higher, longer, crescent-shaped, steel multi-beam and concrete bridge. The Southern approach of Route 8 to the Route 8/28 intersections from the south was altered dramatically to improve safety at the intersection.

Less than a mile away on Route 28 is the **POLAND/DEERFIELD BRIDGE** at the northern boundary of the Village of Poland. The present bridge, a steel pony-truss bridge, was built in 1930. Originally there was an iron bridge at this crossing that was built much later than the first Schermerhorn Bridge. The stone abutments are visible just downstream of the present bridge.

Route 28 is also the site of the **COMSTOCK BRIDGE**, near Blue Road and Partridge Hill Road. The present steel multi-beam bridge was built in 1981 at a new location to make it wider and straighter. This required relocation of 2,300 feet of Route 28. It replaced a steel pony-truss

bridge built in 1930, which was painted blue. Thus the bridge was called the Blue Bridge for 50 years, not because of its proximity to Blue Road. It replaced a Whipple Truss Bridge that collapsed in 1928. In 1915 the bridge received a new top and the bridge was lengthened. It was a joint bridge of both the Towns of Russia and Trenton, maintained by both. On July 7th, 1928 about 5:30 p.m. the bridge couldn't hold the weight of a Model-T full of passengers. All the accident victims stating that the collapse was due to the carelessness and negligence of the two Towns filed a claim against the Town. The bridge had been in need of repair for a long time prior to the collapse. It had been condemned on June 25, 1928 but was still in use. Arthur Jackson's car was in the center of the bridge when the Easterly span of the bridge collapsed. The car went down about fifteen feet onto the wreckage and debris of the collapsed bridge. Another car soon followed. Besides Jackson, filing claims against the Towns for personal damages were: Parker Scripture, Georgia Burrill, Ruth Richardson, Margaret Hupe, Mary Burrill, Ernest Truesdell, Vivian Fuller, Ina Myrick, and Eloise Ross. The Town never had to pay damages because of a law enacted March 26, 1928 which revised the statutes providing for the duty and burden of constructing, reconstructing, and maintaining was upon the State or County if the bridge was on a State or County road. The original Comstock Bridge was one of the later bridges built in the Town because no bridge was needed as the main road came West from Gravesville and ran up the Partridge Hill Road, crossing at Trenton Falls.

The **TRENTON FALLS/DOVER ROAD BRIDGE**, a wooden bridge in the early 1800's, was replaced by an iron Whipple Truss Bridge that washed away in the flood of 1901. A steel thru-truss bridge crossed here in 1913, paid for jointly by the Towns of Russia and Trenton. It was replaced by a steel beam and concrete bridge with wooden side rails in 1992.

**BOONE/PROSPECT ARCH BRIDGE** was the first bridge of any importance in our immediate area.. It was built by Gerritt Boone, agent for the Holland Land Co., at Trenton Falls in the early 1800's as a crossing on the 1803 State Road. In 1828 it was replaced by a covered bridge, which lasted until 1869. Legend has it that while the bridge was under construction, a farmer from the Town of Russia, thinking it passable, rode across on horseback on the stringers in the darkness, not realizing the extent of his feat until the Prospect villagers brought him back to view the slim boards thrown across the chasm. In 1901 the bridge washed away and was rebuilt. A concrete arch bridge was built in 1930 and was twenty foot wide. It was replaced in

1998 with a timber and arch bridge that is the only bridge of its kind in New York State. It has a laminated wood deck and arches and the width has been increased to 26 feet. The million dollar project was funded mainly through a \$750,000 grant from the Federal Highway Administration's Timber Bridge Research and Demonstration Program.

The **GANG MILLS/HINCKLEY CROSSING BRIDGE** was built as a covered bridge in the mid 1800's. An iron bridge that replaced it in 1871 was washed away in the flood of 1901. It was replaced for a short time by an iron "Pipe" bridge. In 1913 a steel thru-truss bridge was built which lasted until 1992 when the present steel beam and cement bridge was built.

The **GRANT BRIDGE** over Black Creek is the responsibility of the County. The present bridge was built in 1961. It is twenty-two feet wide with iron railings and consists of seven reinforced concrete beams. It replaced an iron bridge nearly 100 years old. Concrete abutments constructed in 1914 were retained.

But, the **BLACK CREEK BRIDGE**, located on Black Creek Road, is one of the two Town of Russia bridges that are the responsibility of the Town today. The present bridge was built in the 1950's, under the supervision of Town Highway Superintendent Emory Dykeman. It replaced a dilapidated unsafe bridge.

The other bridge that the Town is responsible for is **BAXTER BRIDGE** on Wheelertown Road, first built in 1807. The present steel bridge was built in 1987. It replaced a wooden deck bridge with steel sides that had been closed for three years. Replacement made life easier for people who live on Wheelertown Road because the bridge made it a thru road again. The school district was able to shorten their run and it made work easier for the Town Highway Department, which had to maintain the road on both sides of the bridge.

There are several other bridges that are important because of accessibility for Town residents that are not located in the Town. **OLD STATE ROAD BRIDGE** was originally an iron bridge which connected Poland to Brayton Corners / Strumlock Road. Located at the Southern boundary of the Village of Poland its stone block abutments and mid-stream pier are still visible. It was replaced, slightly upstream, in 1922 with a concrete arch bridge that spanned West Canada Creek and allowed a train to run underneath. It was condemned and dynamited out of existence,

except for the center pier, in 1996. A new lower and shorter (300 foot) steel beam and concrete bridge was built in 1997. The footing from the old pier was used to support the new pier.

The **FLANSBURG BRIDGE** was built of wood in 1849 over the West Canada Creek on Route 8. Before that, people had to ford the creek or go around by the McIntosh Bridge in Ohio or up across the covered bridge in Wilmurt. Since then, wooden and steel bridges, sometimes called **FLANSBURG, BUSSEY, or CONKLIN**, have succumbed to the Creek. A steel thru-girder bridge was built in 1937. It was replaced in 1998 with a steel beam and concrete bridge dedicated to the Conklin and Flansburg families who were early settlers in that area. It is now officially known as the **CONKLIN BRIDGE**.

The **McINTOSH / HARVEY BRIDGE**, located on Harvey Bridge Road in the Town of Ohio, was originally built as a wooden bridge in 1849, named after the McIntosh family who settled there in 1833. Since then the bridge at this crossing has been replaced many times. Eventually the name was changed to Harvey, another prominent family on that road. Presently, Harvey Bridge is a combination of three surplus bridges spliced together. In 1892 the Creek was rerouted for the first time through a 1,600 foot channel across the great bend upstream of Poland, thus eliminating the need for two long bridges. Today an oxbow is all that's left of that bend. Some of the other bridges no longer in existence include the **SPALL ROAD BRIDGE**, which was not replaced by Town of Russia Highway Superintendent Emory Dykeman when it deteriorated in the 1950's. Spall Road is now an interrupted road with access only available from either end.

**SHAWANGUNK ROAD BRIDGE** is another bridge not replaced by Highway Superintendent Emory Dykeman in the 1950's, because of the cost. This is now a dead end road; the bridge had connected the Town of Russia to the Town of Ohio.

Several other Town bridges were eliminated when Hinckley Reservoir was filled in 1915. One such bridge was **TWIN ROCK BRIDGE**, which was a busy thoroughfare in the 1800's when farmers from Grant crossed West Canada Creek to take their milk to the cheese factory in Gang Mills, now known as Hinckley. The bridge washed away in a flood in April 1855. As it was on the road between Remsen and Grant it was the responsibility of the Towns of Russia and Remsen to replace the bridge. But neither Town did anything until landowners on each side of the bridge

initiated legal action with a legal document filed with the New York State Supreme Court in 1860.

Just downstream from Butler's Crossing, **NORTHWOOD BRIDGE** crossed the Creek at the Village of Northwood. Roads from Grant and Ohio crossed the creek on this bridge until Hinckley Reservoir was flooded in 1915.

**BOUSFIELD BRIDGE**, once located in the same area, also ceased to exist with the creation of the reservoir.

Culverts have replaced several bridges in the Town in the last thirty years. Culverts last longer and are much easier to maintain. Some of these are located on the Beecher Road, Ferris Road, two on Gravesville Road, Mill Road, Ash Road, Hemstreet Road, Elm Flats Road, Main Street in Poland, and Norway Street in Cold Brook.

Some of the other bridges no longer in existence are the **CAMERON HILL BRIDGE**, which crossed between North Gage and Gravesville, and was built in the early 1800's to connect the farms of North Gage to the waterpower and mills in Gravesville. A covered bridge replaced the original bridge when a plank road was built in 1849. In 1937 the Herkimer and Oneida County Highway Departments officially torched this bridge, which was the last covered bridge in the West Canada Valley. The Town Boards of Russia and Deerfield had voted to have the bridge destroyed because of safety concerns. It was never replaced.

The **OLD IRON BRIDGE**, located South of the Village of Poland, crossed the creek to the Brayton Corners-Strumlock Road. This bridge was removed when the Old State Road concrete arch bridge was built in 1929.

There were also many bridges built in the late 1800's to accommodate the railroad. All of these bridges were built of iron, instead of the traditional wood, because of the weight of the trains. They have all been removed or are no longer in use since the termination of the railroad in our area. The **POLAND RAILROAD BRIDGE**, located at the Southern boundary of the Village of Poland, allowed the railroad to cross over to the East side of the creek. It is still standing but blocked.

In 1892 a wooden trestle bridge, known as the **HINCKLEY RAILROAD BRIDGE**, carried a spur of the Mohawk and Malone Railroad across the creek. It was washed away in 1901 and replaced by another wooden bridge that was damaged by floodwaters. A steel railroad bridge was built further downstream and remained in use until the 1930's.

The **TRENTON CHASM RAILROAD BRIDGE** was a single-track bridge built across the chasm in 1893 for the Mohawk and Malone Railroad. The iron bridge was removed in 1943 to support the World War II effort.

Early bridges were generally built of wood because it was inexpensive and there was plenty of it. Cheap wooden bridges lasted seven or eight years and were usually made of pine or spruce plank. Covered bridges became popular in the mid-1800's when it was discovered that placing a barn roof over a wooden bridge increased the longevity of the bridge by protecting the wooden skeleton. Wood's greatest enemy is moisture. The bridges were covered to keep the inside structural timbers dry. If they were kept dry the bridges lasted longer. Floors were expendable. It was most important to protect the supporting sides or trusses, which gave the structure its strength. Some covered bridges floated away and others couldn't hold up to automobile, tractor, or truck traffic. Wooden bridges were also built across many of the tributaries, but they deteriorated rapidly. Even after covered bridges had proven their worth, the less expensive uncovered bridges were still being built into the late 1800's. At one time New York State had more than 250 covered bridges, few exist today. Most covered and wooden bridges were replaced with concrete arch or steel bridges in the early 1900's. Stone bridges were generally out of the question; they took too long to build and were too expensive, though they would last without repairs indefinitely. Still in existence though is **NEWPORT'S FOUR-ARCH STONE BRIDGE** on Bridge Street, built in 1853. Extensive repairs were made to this bridge in 1999. Stone masonry was usually used only for arch spans. Stone was frequently used in modern bridges for architectural purposes to encase steel towers, concrete arches, and piers. Concrete bridges may not have the proportions of stone bridges but are still basically stone. Concrete and steel are used the most today. Abutments support the ends of the bridge. Piers are anchored to the bottom of the creek and support the central part of the bridge. Due to the State's "Good Roads" legislation, a series of laws and appropriations, which were passed from 1907 to 1920, old bridges were replaced with steel and concrete structures. Though, until 1940 there were no

federal or state inspectors or regulators and no permits were needed when building bridges. Until the 1950's most bridges belonged to the Town where they were located and were that Town's responsibility. Bridge maintenance was often the Town's largest expenditure. The State and County have now assumed responsibility for all bridges located on State and County roads. The State has also been very generous in providing funds for bridge maintenance on Town roads. Bridges have played a very important part in the development of the Town of Russia. Historically bridges enabled the early settlers to live and work along the West Canada Creek and its tributaries. Today their beauty and usefulness is often taken for granted until one is closed for repairs.

This booklet was not written to be a definitive study of bridges but a brief synopsis of the bridges in our area and their importance to the evolution of the Town of Russia.



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**In addition to the books mentioned the following individuals shared their knowledge of bridges and the area:**

Bravo, Louis -Town of Russia Councilman

Keesler, M. Paul -Author

Longstaff, Joseph -Town of Russia Highway Superintendent

Powers, Richard -former Town of Russia Highway Superintendent

Schultz, William -former Town of Russia Highway Superintendent

Wilson, Richard -Lecturer and expert on bridges

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