

The Newfield Covered Bridge as it looks today. PHOTO BY RICK LAWRENCE
(Inset) The bridge as it looked in the 1950's. PHOTO BY RANDY SHEW



Keepers of the Newfield Covered Bridge

BY RONDA ENGMAN

There were once 250 covered bridges in New York state. Today just 25 can be found and a number of these are on private land, subject only to pedestrian traffic. Of these 25 bridges, only one is in the Finger Lakes region. It is the Newfield Covered Bridge, the oldest one in daily use in the state.

Spanning the west branch of Cayuga Inlet in Tompkins County's village of Newfield, it is also the most westerly of the state's "original" covered bridges. Cayuga Inlet, a tributary of Cayuga Lake, was once the site of numerous mills and factories including tanneries, woolen mills and saw mills.

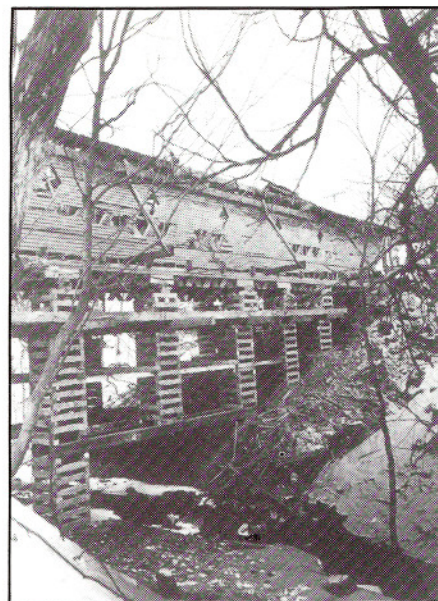
In 1809, Eliakim Dean owned a saw mill just above the site of the Newfield Bridge. In Dean's day, Newfield was named Florence and was part of Tioga County. The first such bridge had only just been built in Philadelphia in 1805, so the Newfield bridge, at the time when Dean operated his mill, was made of logs and was uncovered.

In 1822, shortly after Florence became part of Tompkins County, it was renamed Newfield. Work began on the new bridge in 1851.

The structure of a covered bridge is interesting because both the bridge's floor and supports (trusses) are unexposed, being covered by two walls and a roof. The assumed purpose for covering a bridge is to protect it from the weather to help it last longer with less maintenance.

FINGER LAKES DINING GUIDE

HINDSIGHT



During the restoration, cribbage was installed under the bridge so the trunnels could be replaced. In late June 1972, the same storm that flooded Elmira collapsed some of the cribbage.

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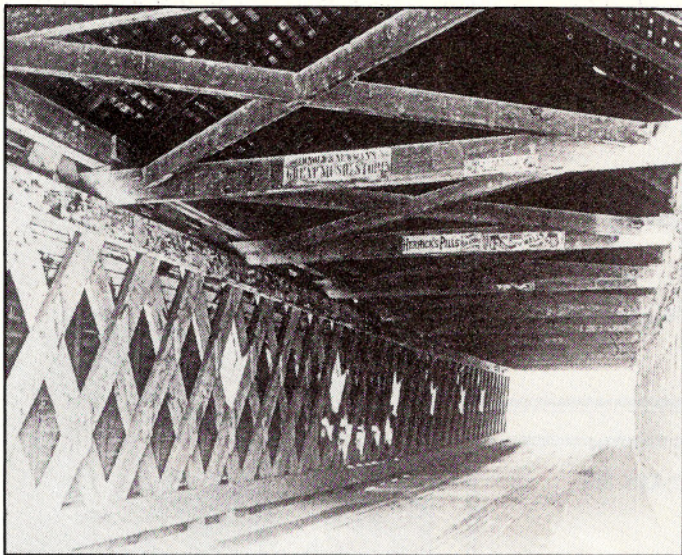
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There are many truss styles, but by far the most popular was designed by Ithiel Town, an architect from New Haven, Connecticut. Town designed a series of diagonally criss-crossing beams held together with wooden pins called treenails (later corrupted to trunnels) that formed a lattice the entire length of the bridge. It was this truss style, the Town Lattice, that was used to support the Newfield bridge.

Stonemasons Benjamin Starr and Dick Russell laid the abutments, while David Dassance, Patchen Parsons, Samuel Hamm and his two sons, David and Sylvester, did the carpentry. Daniel Tunis turned the trunnels. All worked for a dollar a day. In the end, this single-span covered bridge was 115 feet long, 16 wide, and took two years to complete at a cost of about \$800.

In the 1860s, so the story goes, \$200 was deposited in a local bank to pay an artist to decorate the interior of the bridge with murals similar to those in Swiss covered bridges. Unfortunately, the artist died, the Civil War broke out and the murals were never painted. The interior of the bridge was used, however, as a covered billboard with advertisements nailed to the beams. One poster claimed, "Herrick's Pills Removes Bilious Disorders."

Edith Horton, in her book, *A Child in the Nineties*, gives her impression of the Newfield bridge at the turn of the century. "There were small, diamond-shaped openings too high for a child to



In this old picture of the Newfield Bridge, some of the old advertisements are visible. PHOTO COURTESY GRANT AND MARIE MUSSER



The laminated arches in the restored bridge were made of 22 2x12x20-foot pine timbers which came from Cotton Hanton.

PHOTO BY CONNIE SALTONSTALL

reach unless you climbed up. If you did, you could look down upon brown water flowing over flat stones and low willow trees, which grew along the bank and hung over the water, making dark shadows. . . . The bridge smelled of dust and manure and decaying timber. Almost any place was pleasanter.”

The decaying timber mentioned by Edith Horton was caused when dirt, allowed to accumulate on the wood, attracted moisture, making the timber susceptible to rot. Although the bridge was sturdy enough to survive a flood in June 1905 that wiped out several dams along the inlet and washed tons of gravel and sand downstream, the timbers continued to deteriorate to such an extent that in the early 1970s, the Tompkins County Highway Department deemed the bridge unsafe and decided to tear it down.

Grant and Marie Musser of the near-

by town of Lansing were members of the New York State Covered Bridge Society at the time and took on the bridge’s cause. Ultimately, the highway department was convinced of the historical importance of the bridge and efforts were initiated to restore it.

Milton S. Graton of Ashland, New Hampshire, considered by many to be the world’s leading authority on covered bridge construction and restoration, was brought in to inspect the bridge. “Its condition was not good,” Graton wrote of the Newfield bridge in his book, *The Last of the Covered Bridge Builders*. Graton found that some of the trusses had lost their camber and that the bridge was buckling despite the fact that, during a repair job twenty-five years earlier, four outriggers (butches) had been placed on each side of the bridge to give it exterior support.



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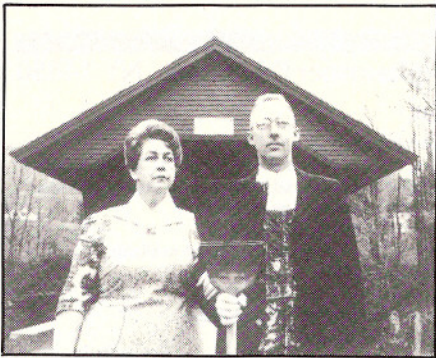
Cedar St. at Denison Pkwy.
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This 1971 photo shows Milton Graton at work measuring inside the bridge for the placement of the laminated arch.

PHOTO BY CONNIE SALTONSTALL

Graton took nine months to restore the bridge. During that time, he replaced old and rotting wood to correct the camber, added interior arch supports, which eliminated the buckling and permitted the removal of the outriggers and raised the roof two feet to allow for a twenty-six-foot clearance. The portal's flat design was changed to



Grant and Marie Musser, official keepers of the Newfield Covered Bridge.

PHOTO BY CONNIE SALTSONSTALL

a raised design, the old siding was replaced with new hemlock planks and the roof's shingles were replaced with new ones Graton brought from Maine of white cedar that were half-an-inch thick and thirty-six inches long with an eighteen-inch exposure. At one point in the restoration, the entire bridge was also raised one foot to allow for better drainage. Finally, the bridge was repainted red — the color it has been for as long as anyone can remember. The work was completed in 1972, just in time for Newfield's sesquicentennial. Total cost of the restoration was \$44,000.

Grant and Marie Musser, because of their interest in the bridge and their dedication to preserving it, were appointed Keepers of the Newfield Covered Bridge on April 30, 1973. Along with this official title go certain duties including overseeing the spring and fall cleaning of the bridge to insure that it will never deteriorate as before, landscaping around the bridge, inspecting the bridge periodically and making recommendations to the highway department about repairs. The Mussers are the only known keepers of a covered bridge in the country. "We're proud of it," Marie Musser says of the Newfield Covered Bridge.

This year the bridge celebrates its 134th birthday. With the help of concerned people like the Mussers, the Newfield Covered Bridge will last for many more generations. □

The Newfield Covered Bridge is located five miles south of Ithaca off Route 13 in the village of Newfield. Follow the signs on Rte. 13.

Ronda Engman is a Tompkins County resident and writer for national magazines. She has visited most of the covered bridges in New York and Massachusetts.

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