



The Swing Bridge at New Bridge

connecting River Edge, Teaneck & New Milford

The bridge provides important pedestrian access to the New Bridge Landing train stop on the Pascack Valley line just to the west of Historic New Bridge Landing.

New Bridge; the oldest extant highway swing-bridge in the State of New Jersey. As such, it exemplifies the early use of industrial materials and technological ingenuity (as perfected in the last quarter of the nineteenth century) to solve the common problem of moving overland traffic across navigable inland waterways.

Situated two miles south of the head of navigation, New Bridge spanned the strategic Narrows of the Hackensack River, a tidal artery of commerce, carrying the main road from Bergen Neck to the Hackensack Courthouse. It formed a vital nexus in the flow of trade and transportation, well into the present century. In 1888, the Freeholders of Bergen County decided to replace the last in a succession of wooden draw-bridges which had spanned the Hackensack River at this location since 1744. This replacement by a turntable bridge of greater durability and ease of maintenance was part of a broader program to facilitate schooner navigation. Commercial brickyards in the Hackensack valley, then at the height of their productivity were greatly impeded in their output by the slow operation and low clearance of the wooden draws. By 1876, brick schooners had been supplemented by a small fleet of tug drawn barges to overcome such obstacles to navigation. With the steady advance in pop-

ulation and a multiplication in the number of bridges spanning the navigable portions of the stream, a lively water-borne traffic in coal, lumber and agricultural products had been similarly inconvenienced. The earliest use of iron members in the construction of bridges can be traced to the advent of the industrial revolution in the eighteenth century. Thomas Paine designed an iron bridge to span the Schuylkill at Philadelphia and exhibited a model there in January of 1787. He later succeeded in erecting one in Britain that was torn down for scrap during the First World War. The Pratt truss bridge came iron truss by 1855, but there are not true Pratt truss bridges surviving, only truss



Both photographs of the 1889 bridge taken shortly after it was built.

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systems that resemble the originals. During the Civil War, large-scale iron and steel foundries, centered around Pittsburgh were able to offer bridge components manufactured of these superior materials as safe and economical alternatives to bridges fashioned from heavy timbers. Post-war development of a transcontinental network of railroads, paralleled by advances in the science and industry



Walking Tour on the Bridge by Historian Kevin Wright, 2015.

of metallurgy, produced numerous improvements in the design and reliability of iron bridges. Accordingly, the Bergen County Freeholders employed the King Bridge Company of Cleveland, Ohio, in the autumn of 1887 to install a fixed low truss iron bridge at the Old Bridge crossing in northern River Edge. At the same time, consideration was given to repairing the wooden New Bridge downstream. On April 12, 1888, replacement with a swinging iron bridge at the latter location was deemed feasible and was so approved on June 4, 1888, “at a cost not to exceed \$9000.” Eight bridge companies submitted bids. On August 6, 1888, the contract for the superstructure was awarded to the King Iron Bridge Company for \$3990. By 1884, King operated the largest highway bridge-works in the United States. The Company was founded by Zenus King in 1858 but was not incorporated as the King Iron Bridge and Manufacturing Company until 1871. It established its office at the corner of St. Clair and Wason Streets in Cleveland. By 1887, the style had been shortened to the King Bridge Company. The contract for the sub-structural masonry was awarded to Caroline Stagg for \$3994. She acted as an agent for Joseph Westervelt Stagg, who operated a house-moving and bridge-building business in Englewood. He served as a Freeholder between 1871 and 1873 and was well-known in the area. On August 31, the Bergen County Democrat reported that “Joseph Stagg commenced operations this week in tearing down the Bridge at New Bridge, and began laying the abutments.” In November, the same newspaper said: “Contractor Stagg had completed his portion of the

contract” but “no attempt has been made on the part of the new contractor to do their work and thus open the highway. “ To accommodate the public, Joseph Stagg built a temporary foot-bridge and subsequently billed the Freeholders for \$100. On December 28, 1888, the Bergen County Democrat reported on an attempt to discover by correspondence the reason why the King Bridge Company was defaulting on its contract. The Company had offered the excuse that their manufacturing works had been extensively damaged by fire, but an inquiry to the Cleveland postmaster brought the reply: “We are informed they had a fire sometime last May; damage slight.” After considerable delay, the Company finally began to install the iron bridge in January of 1889. A final comment in the local newspaper on February 8, 1889, proclaimed: “The bridge was thrown open to public travel on Saturday, and the people are happy.” Although installed by the King Iron Bridge Company, the truss is all marked “Phoenix Iron Co., Philadelphia, Pa.” The Phoenix Bridge Company, a division of the Phoenix-Iron Company, primarily built railroad bridges. This Company had its origins in Phoenixville in 1790 but later established its offices at 410 Walnut Street in Philadelphia. By 1928, in anticipation of the real estate attendant upon completion of the George Washington Bridge plans were made to straighten the narrow winding approaches at New Bridge and to replace the obsolete span with a bridge of more modern design. A right-of-way was purchased, running adjacent to the south end of the historic Steuben House, but no further progress on the project was

